

ROCKET STORIES^k

IN THIS ISSUE • ANDERSON • BUDRYS • LESSER

JULY 1953 35c



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ROCKET STORIES

JULY, 1953

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A N E D I T O R I A L O N THE GLORY ROAD

Man is beginning to guess where he's going. He has his eyes on a road that leads upwards and onwards, without any visible end—if he can just look high enough. Maybe he doesn't have any idea of how he's going to get there, but he knows he's headed outwards, off this Earth, and probably completely out of the Solar System.

After all, he never did quite know how the next step would be taken. He just wanted to take it badly enough so that someone finally found a way. Leonardo da Vinci dreamed of getting off the ground and flying. He was sure men could do it, too. But in his day, there wasn't a chance. No known source of power was both light enough and strong enough to lift the flying machine he had devised. It took a few hundred years for the gasoline engine to come along. But da Vinci was right—men learned to fly.

A quarter of a century ago, men were dreaming of reaching the Moon, or maybe even the planets. They had an idea that it could be done by rockets. But the best rockets then could just about get a mile off the ground, carrying a few ounces of payload. Getting a ship loaded with men and supplies up the long quarter-million-mile trail to the Moon was something for the distant future.

Today, it looks as if that trip will be made before we're too old to appreciate it. They're already sending up tons of ship to heights that lead beyond anything that could be called an atmosphere—unless the inside of a vacuum tube is called an atmosphere, too. There's a lot of expense and engineering left. But nobody who thinks seriously about it can question the fact that with enough money, it can and will be done. Money is always a problem—but when enough people want something, they find the money, somehow. And today, people are beginning to set their course on the stars, not by them.

But we haven't the faintest idea of how we can get to the stars within the life-span of any single individual. At nearly double the speed needed to escape Earth and reach the Moon, we still would need more than *fifty thousand years* to reach the nearest stars. To

reach even half the speed of light wouldn't help as much as one might think. It would still take thirty to forty years, counting acceleration and deceleration both ways.

Oh, sure, we talk about space warping hyperspace, nullifying inertia, and a thousand other tricks. But those are just words, with no real ideas behind them yet. They only cover up our ignorance—just as the speculation of da Vinci on how birds flew covered up his ignorance of any way to get power enough for a man to fly.

Well, fifty years ago nobody really knew much about how we could reach the Moon. There were anti-gravity screens, magnetic rays, huge guns to shoot out projectiles, and everything except the step-rocket and the Space Station. Nobody even thought seriously of getting to another star.

Today, half of our stories seem to take faster-than-light travel for granted. We've made tremendous progress, both in getting off the earth, and in getting our eyes further up the road toward infinity. Science fiction has given wings and jets to men's imagination. And now it is tackling the problem of giving them something else, which will remove all limits of distance.

In another fifty years, men are going to be on the planets. And by then, our guess is that they'll have a pretty clear idea of how they're going to lick the problem of getting out into the whole universe. When that happens, of course, science fiction will have to find something even further to dream about. We can't guess what that will be, either, but we're sure there will be something.

Man is going to keep right on dreaming. And the time it takes to turn his dreams into reality keeps getting shorter and shorter. Magazines like this are not concerned with reality, yet—but they are concerned with those dreams, and in trying to bring a feeling of the reality that is to come.

So we say, let's keep the shackles off. Let's not ignore the things we already know, but let's also not ignore the fact that we've got a lot to learn yet. And to experience. And to dream about. That's our business at the moment. And we love every bit of it.

Wade Kaempfert

BLOOD ON MY JETS



BY ALGIS BUDRYS

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

They were the hired gun-rabble of the System, engaged in the dirtiest, most thankless racket in all the worlds. But Ash Holcomb was doing all right, until the girl walked out of his past with high stakes in her pockets and murder in her eyes!



Rocket Row is the Joy Street of three planets. It's got neon lights, crummy dives, cheap hotels, and women to match. Every man who's ever rode a ship into space knows about Rocket Row. It runs along the far side of Flushing Spaceport, down toward the Sound.

The New Shanghai was full of dockworkers and crewmen on liberty. It was noisy. I sat on a bar stool and watched the fog trying to infiltrate the open door. It didn't have a chance against the tobacco smoke that rolled out to meet it. Outside, the streets and alleys would be choked with wet, creeping darkness, full of quiet footsteps, and the cops would find empty-pocketed corpses behind the ashcans in the morning.

But none of that was any of my business. I was sick and tired of fog—the real kind, the kind they grow on Venus—and I was sick of the thought of blood. I'd seen too much of it, soaking into the hot mud, and some of it spilled by my guns. I wanted to forget the night, and fog that gave cover to every kind of dirty deal a man could imagine. I wanted to pull the corners of my world together until all that was left was the drink, the bar stool, and me. But it wasn't going to work out that way, be-

cause I was in the New Shanghai on business.

And my kind of business was the dirtiest, lousiest, most thankless racket in the world.

The bartender moved up to where I was sitting. "Have another one, Ash?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, Ming," I said. "You still make the best Stingers in the System. Maybe that's because you don't brew your own gin."

"Could be, Ash, could be," he laughed. He shook up the drink and poured it in my glass. "How'd it go on Venus?"

"It went," I said.

Ming was one of the few people who admitted knowing I was a D. O.—a Detached Operative. It was a crummy job, but it suited me.

We were the hired-gun rabble of the System, thrown together into the damndest police force there had ever been. Spacial expansion hadn't really gotten underway until after the Terro-Martian War, and after it ended every would-be bigshot there was had realized that all he really needed to set himself up as a pocket-size dictator was some salvaged gear from the mess the war had left, a crew that wasn't too particular, and a good-looking piece of territory in the practically limitless areas of space. Most of them had picked

slices of Venus. There were a few in the Asteroids, hooked up with renegade Marties, and one or two that had actually grabbed sections of Mars.

Sending regular law enforcement officers or Marines after each one of these boys would have been physically impossible. Earth government had come up with a cuter idea.

It was a lot more economical to fight one big decisive battle than to endure a series of inconclusive skirmishes. There were a lot of us boys out in space, most of us just drifting from one port to the next, picking up a living by our wits, and by our skill with a gun, some of us. Earth government had quietly picked out the ones they considered trustworthy, sworn us in, and turned us loose with a few standing orders and a lot of dependence on our discretion.

Whenever something brewed between two of these minor warlords, we'd come flocking in and hire ourselves out to whichever side we felt had slightly more justice. Sometimes we wound up shooting at each other, but you couldn't even be sure of that, since most of us didn't know, beyond a guess or two, who the other D. O.'s were. Usually, though, we had enough brains to pick the right side, and we'd

make sure that was the one that came out on top.

It was a process of elimination, actually. The warlords were helped to knock each other off until, eventually, those who remained either proved themselves to be strong leaders, which was what frontier planets needed, or else megalomaniacs, in which case it paid to devote a full-scale military campaign to them.

It was a highly informal system, but it had worked. It was tough on us, but it wasn't any harder than freelance grifting had been. It left an awful lot to personal discretion, and we paid ourselves out of whatever came to hand, but there hadn't been any big totalitarian regimes lately, either.

"Yeah, I did pretty well," I repeated.

Ming puckered his mouth and winked. I used to try and figure out how he did it, standing behind his bar all day, never going out, never talking much except to a few people like me. But I knew for sure that he could have told me exactly how much I'd made on that Venus job—and the gimmick I'd pulled to get it past Customs, too.

But that was why I was in here. Something was up—something big, and I wanted to find out what it was before every grifter and chiseler in the Sys-

tem tried to cut a piece of it for himself.

"I got a note in my mailbox today," I said casually.

"Yeah?" he asked, just as quietly.

"Must have been put there as soon as I touched down this morning. Somebody wants me to go to work for them. They're paying high—too high, maybe. Hear anything about a big job coming off somewhere?"

Ming grinned. "If you mean that little letter from Transolar, yeah, I know about that." He got serious, and moved closer.

"But that's all I know, and nobody else knows even that much. Sure, something's cooking, but nobody knows what it is. I—" He broke off. "You've got company. Boy, *have* you got company!"

I looked in the backbar mirror. A girl had come in the doorway and was walking toward me. Her dress tightened in intriguing places. Her face was as much of a treat. High-cheeked, brown-eyed, with a small, uptilted nose and a full mouth, it was framed by short curly hair the color of new copper wire. I liked it.

So did the spacemen and the dockworkers sitting at the bar. One or two half-rose to invite her to join them, but they sat down again when they saw who she was headed for.

There was something about that hair. I'd seen it before, somewhere.

The guy next to me got up and slid out of the way. I let my eyes stay on the bottles on the backbar until she sat down beside me. I gave Ming a look. He nodded, and moved down the bar.

"Ash?"

The voice was low, but crisp. It had whispers and murmurs in it, too, and I knew I'd heard it before.

"I'm Pat McKay."

I turned my head and looked at her. Her dress, tight as paint from hem to bodice, was mysteriously loose in the sleeves. Ruffles at each shoulder hid bulges that Mother Nature never put there. They looked more like twin shoulder holsters. They were.

And the last time I'd seen her, she was seventeen—eighteen, maybe—in a ball gown, her hair long then, curling around her shoulders.

And the voice hadn't been as controlled, or as crisp, but she'd been saying, "You're a good dancer, Mr. Holcomb. Not much on the light conversation, but a good leader."

I'd swept her around another couple, and kept my cheek away from hers. "The Academy is geared to the production of good

leaders, Pat. Good conversation-
alists, on the other hand, are
born, not made."

She laughed—a giddy party
laugh from a girl who dated
Academy boys exclusively, who
loved the glitter and pomp of
graduation ceremonies, who
hung around the Academy all
she could, who had been to
Graduation Balls before, and
would certainly be to a number
of them again, before she man-
aged to separate all the black
and silver uniforms she'd danced
with and found herself a man
from inside one of them. An
Academy drag—a number in a
score of little black books.

"Like Harry—oh, pardon me,
it's Graduation Night—like Mr.
Thorsten, you mean?" And she
looked up at me, raking my face
with her green eyes.

"If you will."

"You're jealous, Mr. Hol-
comb," she said, breaking out her
best little tease manner.

"Maybe." I knew she was try-
ing to get me angry. She was
getting there fast, too.

"Well, now, if you displayed
some of Mr. Thorsten's other
gifts, I could forget about the
conversation," she said lightly.

"Meaning you'd like me to
dance you out on the terrace and
make a pass at you?"

"Maybe."

She was daring me.

I danced her out on the ter-
race, and found a darker corner.
She looked up at me, her eyes a
little surprised, but her lips were
parted.

I tightened my arms and
kissed her. It started gently—
just a kiss sneaked in between
dances—but her arms were
growing tighter too, and her fin-
gers were hooking. We held it,
while I listened to the blood run-
ning in my ears, until we broke
apart, both of us dropping our
arms, standing and looking at
each other, dragging air down
our throats.

"Ash! You—"

She started to say something,
and broke it. It sounded a little
too much like a movie heroine,
all of a sudden. She was holding
the pose a little too long, too.
"Hell, she's a kid—she's doing
it the way the grown-ups in the
movies do it," I told myself, but
I'd danced her out here for a
purpose. Maybe she didn't de-
serve it, but I was sick to death
of the little bits of fluff that hung
around, drinking in borrowed
glamor, getting the big play
from boys like Harry Thorsten.

I reached out and grabbed.

"Now comes the part you've
really been asking for," I said.
I crouched, bent her over my
knee, and brought my hand
down. Hard. Three times in all,
putting everything I had into it.

"Now," I said, letting her get up, "maybe you'll quit bothering guys who worked all their lives to get in a spot where they could go out and be of some help in the only job they ever wanted—the TSN. Do you think you really stack up worth a damn beside the only thing that counts?"

She just stood there, tears of rage in her eyes. I was never sure whether it was what I'd done or what I said that had her so mad, but the last thing I heard her say as I walked away was: "Damn you, Ash Holcomb! Damn you for being such a snob-bish stuck-up . . ."

Well, maybe I was wrong and maybe I wasn't. I didn't know as much in those days as I should have, either. But it was too late now—too late by a war and a hundred revolutions, too late by all the men who'd gone down before my guns, too late by years of loneliness and bitterness.

But if it was too late, why did I remember it all now, with Thorsten up in the Asteroids, a little king in his own right, with me in the New Shanghai, a white ray-burn splashed through my hair, with the Academy a dim thing behind both of us, and Pat—

Why was Pat here? What had she done through the years, while I fought my way from one end of the System to the other,

and Harry took the easy way out during the war?

"Hello, Pat," I said. "I haven't seen you in a long time." Well, what else was I going to say?

I don't know what she had expected me to say. She kept her face in profile, and didn't let me see what it was showing.

"I'm here on business. I hear you're a good man, these days, for the job I've got." She twisted the words like a knife.

All right, if she wanted it that way, she'd get it.

"So they tell me," I said.

"Fifteen thousand for a month's work."

She said it quietly, without any build-up. Maybe she figured fifteen thousand didn't need one.

I sat there for a minute, not saying anything, but thinking hard. What kind of a setup was she offering me? Was this the big job that was floating around? There's usually a sure way to find out. When someone offers you a blind deal, argue. Maybe they'll get mad, or scared you won't take it, and spill something.

"No, thanks," I said.

She frowned. "Don't try haggling with me, Ash. I can get somebody just as good for less."

"I don't doubt it. You could probably get three. That's why

I don't want any part of it. It's sucker bait."

She looked at me for the first time, mouth twisted.

"Since when does a hired gun like you turn down that kind of money? The job's worth it, believe me."

That hit me. But I couldn't afford to get touchy.

"Probably is. But with standard pay at three thousand a month, plus bounties and commissions, this little errand of yours, whatever it may be, must break so many laws it could land me in a death house," I said, watching her eyes.

It didn't add up. Nothing added up. Why had she picked me, in the first place? I had a reputation as one of the better gunnies, sure, but there were at least twenty guys I'd never draw against, if I could help it, and four or five of them were available. Because she'd known me? And this job—what kind of hanky-panky was going on at these prices?

I watched her eyes acquiring dangerous highlights. The temper that went with that hair was beginning to stir.

"Do you want to get in on the biggest deal that's ever been pulled off in space or don't you?" she said. "Or are you going to chicken out?" she added contemptuously.

I let it slide off my shoulders.

"I don't know," I said. I wanted to get a chance to really talk things out with her, and this wasn't the place for it. "Anyway, this is no place to talk business. Walk out of here as if I'd turned you down, and go up the street. I'll catch up to you."

"Okay." She got up and walked out.

"Sorry, Honey," I called after her, loud enough for everybody to hear. A snicker went up. I cut it off with a look at the characters lined up against the bar, and got back to my drink. I finished it casually, put it down, paid, and walked slowly to the door. I let everybody get a good look at me turning down the street in the opposite direction from the one Pat had taken.

I ducked into the first cross street and moved swiftly over to the alley that paralleled the street that Pat was on. I was thinking all the way.

Being a D.O. was one thing—getting into something solo was another. I could get killed, for all I knew, and maybe by a lawman's gun. That was a risk I ran on every job, but in this case, I didn't even know, yet, what was going on. The smart thing to do would have been to pass the word to my SBI contact, but that would take too much time. There was nothing I could do but

dive into this mess head-on, and hope I'd have time to yell for help later.

I was about to turn into another alley that ran back to the main street when I heard the coughing of a Saro airgun and the faint sizzle of a Colt in reply.

Instantly, I was running silently up the alley. One hand unzipped the chest of my cover-all, and the other one dove in and grabbed the butt of the heavy Sturmey that's my favorite man-killer. I reached the mouth of the alley and stopped abruptly in the shadows.

A man lay in the middle of the street, unnaturally flat against the concrete slab. The street lamp up the block was dark, its base surrounded by shattered glass.

The Saro went into action again from the roof of a building across the street. I saw the slugs chip cement from the railing of a flight of steps four doors up. A pale blue flare winked from behind the railing, and the man with the Saro ducked, but was up again as another gun raked the stairs from a spot on my side of the street. I didn't like that setup one bit.

The Sturmey in my hand went *whoomp!* and the man on the roof sailed out over the street and landed with a crunch. The

other gun cut off abruptly. Two Colt beams probed for it from the stairs, and that clinched it. It was Pat, all right, and somewhere, she'd become a fair hand at street fighting.

"Hey, Pat!" I yelled, and ducked away from the storm of bullets the other gunman flung at me. The result was what I'd hoped for. The man had exposed himself to Pat's fire by shooting at me. The Colts sizzled viciously, and the burst of Saro noise stopped in mid-clip.

A gun clattered on cement. I poked my head cautiously around the corner. Silence blanketed Rocket Row, and then was tempered by a scuffling noise. Up the street, a leather belt was being pressed against the side of a building by the weight of a body that was sliding slowly downwards. I spotted a glowing dot that was a tunic smoldering around a Colt burn.

"Ash!"

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

I grinned. She sounded a little worried.

I sprinted across the street at a weaving run, and dove behind the stairway.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know—but I've got an idea. I got about a hundred yards up the street when I spotted this guy tailing me. I yelled, and he

ducked. At the same time, this other fellow started running toward me across the street. I burned him down, and ducked in here just as the bird on the roof opened up. That's it, until you came along."

I swore. I didn't go for three men gunning one girl. I looked over the top of the railing. One or two people were starting to come out of doorways.

"Maybe we'd better get out of here," I said.

We ran up the street to another alley. She re-holstered her guns on the way, revealing a lot of what the dress advertised.

We stopped inside the alley and caught our breaths. "Well, anyway," I said, "I know what you're in this for."

She looked up sharply. "What?"

"You need money to buy some underwear with."

She slammed her hand into my face. I ducked back, and stood there, blinking.

"Look, Holcomb, as far as I'm concerned, the deal's on. Fine. Thanks for helping me out back there, too. But just thanks—no further payment. And no kidding around. This is a business deal. Have you got that straight, or do I burn you down where you stand and find another boy?"

She meant it. I looked down at her hand, and one of the Colts was in it.

"Okay." I hadn't meant that crack as a pass; but as long as the question had come up, it was all right by me to have it settled right here. "But put that thing away before I make you eat it."

She grinned, suddenly, and put the gun back. "I'm sorry, Ash. But it's the best way I've ever found to establish a clear-cut business relationship. Partners?"

She stuck out her hand, and I took it.

"Deal."

A siren rose and died on Rocket Row. Pat jumped back. "Damn it!" she said. She shot a glance up the alley. "We'd better split up," she said. "Look, Ash," she said hastily, "I'll get in touch with you. Meanwhile, do what I tell you to, and don't waste time asking me why. I'll tell you later. All you have to do now is take the job Transolar is going to offer you. That's all. Take that job, and start to carry it out. I'll be in touch with you somewhere along the line."

She looked down toward the alley's mouth. I followed her glance, and saw shadowy figures of men running by.

"They'll be in here in a minute. I've got a car a couple of blocks away. I'll see you, Ash."

"Yeah. Hurry up," I added, as the first of the cops came warily into the alley.

I pulled my gun and ducked behind a barrel as she started to run. The cop yelled and came after her. I snapped a shot over his head, and that drove him into cover. Over the shouts that rose, I could hear her footsteps fading out.

I followed her cautiously, sliding from behind one ashcan to another, keeping the cops down with an occasional shot. I made it out of the alley and into the street, then ducked into a doorway, kicked the lock loose, took the stairs two at a time to the roof, and got away over the housetops.

And all the time, I was wondering about Pat, the job that Transolar was going to offer me, and how she'd known about it.

II

Mort Weidmann was the same Captain Weidmann who'd left an arm in the cockpit of a K class scoutbomber that he'd flown through a formation of Marties while he almost bled to death. He looked very military in his blue and silver uniform. It wasn't a TSN uniform, of course, but even a Transolar Express rig makes an old soldier feel better.

He was another old friend of mine, like Thorsten. The three of us had been touched by the war, each in our separate ways. Mort was the one who didn't just feel a yearning for space, who didn't just ride on a TSN uniform because it was the one available way. Mort had loved the TSN itself, with a pride in the traditions that guys like Thorsten and me hadn't quite had. He'd been a better officer because of it—and the only one who couldn't have stayed.

And, as we'd gone our separate ways, so our ways of thinking had changed. Thorsten—well, he'd taken his choice, and some day I might have to go into the Belt and do something about it, but Mort's attitude hurt. He didn't have any respect for me—he couldn't have, for a man who'd resigned his commission and become a planet-hopper.

He stood at the window in his office, his phony arm tucked into a pocket, his moustache moving up and down as he talked to me.

"I don't know why they picked you, Ash," he said.

I leaned back in my chair. "I don't either—unless maybe it's because they couldn't find anybody else with my qualifications. Or maybe it's because they can trust me, and they know it." I was getting pretty mad. Weid-

mann was a right guy, but I was getting sick of being offered jobs without being told what they were. Two in two days was a little too much.

Weidmann turned around. "Don't get edgy, Ash! I've got my orders—they came down from the top brass, and I'll carry them, whether I approve or not. But don't get me sore. I'm authorized to offer you ten thousand dollars, plus expenses, for one trip to Titan and back. You'll be carrying extremely valuable cargo, and you'll be expected to deliver it intact. Do you want the job, or not?"

I didn't answer him right away. What was wrong with him? There was more than just dislike riding his voice.

"I don't get," I stalled. "Like you've said, why me? And why Titan? There's nothing out there. Besides, the Asteroid Belt is full of Marties, to say nothing of Thorsten and his crew. Nobody in his right mind would try to make that trip without a convoy."

Weidmann flushed. "For your information," he said, "there's a small scientific staff in a bubble on Titan. They need a new charge for their power pile, and we've got the shipping contract. Our problem is to get it to them without Thorsten or the Martians learning about it and grab-

bing it up. That's why we dug you up. We need somebody who can fly it out to them and fight off raiders at the same time. You're still the best available."

So that was the big job! No wonder there were so many phony things going on!

"For God, for Country, and for Transolar, huh?" I said, watching the blood leave his face. "Now why should I help you pull your fat contracts out of the fire? What's it to me if a bunch of technicians don't get their damn fuel? The stuff'd be worth plenty to either Thorsten or the Marties. Living in the Asteroids isn't fun—I've done it, and it takes power to maintain a bubble. Believe me, they'll throw everything they've got to keep a ship carrying a pile charge from making it past them."

I must have sounded pretty nasty about it, because Weidmann actually yanked that murderous motorized artificial arm out of his pocket. He pulled up his shoulders and looked at me like I was something floating down a sewer, but he kept his voice even.

"All right, Ash. Ten thousand, plus expenses. You'll be given a new kind of ship. It's a model we picked up from a manufacturer who had his contract cancelled by the TSN. She was originally designed for armed

reconnaissance, and we've installed the weapons called for in the original specifications. She'll outfly anything with jets on it, and stand off a cruiser, given room to maneuver. Does that soothe you, or do you want a convoy, too?" he added scornfully.

I lit a cigarette and pretended to think it over. Actually, of course, I was going to take the job. I would have, anyway, but there were two additional reasons why I wouldn't turn it down. There was Pat, of course, and her orders. Most important though, had been the fact that the message to report to Weidmann that I'd found in my mailbox at the Spacemen's Hiring Hall had borne a slightly different Post Office cancellation on the stamp than the usual. The "T" in United wasn't quite formed the way it was on the regular stamp. It wasn't apparent unless you looked for it—but it was as good as a big red sign that spelled out "Official United Terrestrial Government Business—Act as Directed With-in," because that was what it meant.

"Sounds better than I expected," I admitted. "All right. When do I go?"

Weidmann didn't show any expression to indicate disappointment or satisfaction. He simply

said, "Tonight, after we check over the details. The ship's equipped with standard TSN controls, and you'll have lots of time to test her flight characteristics once you get out in space."

"What happens if she explodes. Don't I get to test her first?"

"No—there isn't time, and it would be a dead giveaway." For the first time, I saw something like satisfaction on Weidmann's face. "And if she explodes . . . well, frankly, Holcomb, that's your problem."

I spent the afternoon being briefed. One thing was off my mind—if I had official orders to take this job, then the SBI would be keeping a tab on me. It made a difference, knowing that no matter what kind of a mess I got into, somebody would at least know what had happened to me, and, most important, why.

I was given a Company flight suit, and a hip rig for my Sturmei. I put those on, and was taken to within a block of the port in a shuttered car.

Not going all the way to the spaceport was my idea. The reason I gave Weidmann was good enough—there was no sense putting up neon markers to indicate that I was up to something special—but I had a better one than that. I had to

give Pat a chance to get in touch with me.

It didn't work out that way.

I began walking down toward the Transolar revetment, using a shortcut street, looking around for Pat. It was a cinch she'd had some kind of a tail on me, and I was expecting to see her step out of almost any of the doorways I passed.

Instead, I heard something.

Back up the street, the way I had come, boot soles whispered on concrete. I turned around and looked, buried in shadow.

I couldn't see anything. I turned back around, and kept on walking, and I heard a holster being unsnapped. I stopped to listen, and there was only silence. I moved, and somebody slipped a safety catch.

I leaped suddenly to my right. My shoulders touched the wall of a house. My hands blurred forward, one locking on my holster and holding it down, the other scooping the Sturmey out and clear of the leather, then blurring again as I shot my hand as far away from me as I could, fired down the street, and spun myself away from the building. I fired again, and the street lamp above my head smashed into bits. Then I was in a deep doorway, crouched, waiting, while ribbons of light cut creases in the wall where I'd been.

That was how it began. There were endless minutes of silence, and then someone would drag a heel or kick a step. There'd be the kick of my gun against my palm, and once, the count on their side dropped from five to four.

A dot of light flickered from behind a high gutter, and rock chipped off a wall near my head. I ducked, kissed the sidewalk with my belly, slithered down a flight of steps to a basement alcove, rolled over, and slid behind the stone. On the way down, I fired back, and I heard a rasp of metal on stone. Not the momentary rake of a belt buckle or button, but a gun, dragging its muzzle against curbing while the man who'd fired it kicked his life away in the gutter. I heard it drop the last inch to the street.

I knew they'd be flanking me pretty soon. I heard cloth whisper as two of them slipped off to each side. The fellow they'd left behind began firing from all angles, weaving back and forth to cover them. He put too much pattern in his weave, though, and that was his mistake. The pattern broke, and became random as the guns spun out of his hands before he could even realize there was a shot coming.

Two! I rolled away from behind the steps, crouched, and

padded away on the balls of my feet. My boots had special spongé soles on them, but even so, a lance of blue slashed from down the street against my calf. I plowed into the sidewalk, furrowing my face and tearing meat off the knuckles wrapped around my gun. I tried not to catch my breath too loudly as I dragged myself behind the ornamental outcrop of the bannister on the next flight of steps.

My leg felt like there was a railroad spike driven into it, and my knuckles were numb and stiff. I worked my fingers to keep them from freezing up on me, even though jolts of pain came up and hammered at the backs of my eyes. My face felt wet and itchy. I lay there, waiting.

I got one more of them. He decided I was dead, and poked his pale face out against a black wall. The face vanished in a burst of red, and he sprawled back. I chuckled.

There wasn't much I could do but chuckle. The one guy left had me cold. I had no idea where he was, but he'd seen the flash of my gun. I couldn't shift position fast enough or quietly enough to get away. All I could do was lie there.

He took a chance and jumped me. I never heard him coming.

A gun bounced off my head, and I went under— But not be-

fore I looked up and saw that it was Pat herself.

III

I remember lying on my back for quite awhile before I wanted to open my eyes. I knew I wasn't on the street. The air was warm, and heated, and I was on a bed, or something like it. My leg was giving me hell where it had been burned, but I could feel the pressure of a bandage. I couldn't tell about my hand and face—they felt as if something had been done about them, too, but I couldn't find out for sure without looking or touching them, and I didn't want to do that yet.

Why the hell had Pat jumped me? I couldn't figure it.

I opened my eyes, and she was standing over me, a gun dangling from one hand. I threw a look at my watch, and saw I'd been out a half hour, at most.

"What the hell—" I began.

She cut me off with a gesture of the gun. "Shut up," she said wearily. "You'll have plenty of time to start lying later." She grimaced with tired disgust.

I shook my head, but I knew better than to go on talking. There was anger working its way into the hurt look in her eyes.

I got up, ignoring the feeling in my calf, and noticed several

other things. I'd been lying on a low couch. My flying boots were unzipped, so that I couldn't move faster than a shuffle. The coveralls were loose around my waist where my harness had been.

I pressed my left upper arm against my ribs. As far as I could tell, they hadn't found my insurance policy—a little single-shot burner hidden between two of my ribs under a strip of what looked like skin. There was colloid on my face, and tape on my knuckles.

"Happy?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. I'm Prince Charming, you're Snow White, and, as far as I can add up, somebody's fresh out of dwarves. What's going on around here, anyway?"

"You double-crossed me, that's what happened. We made a deal, and you sold out on it!" She was working herself to boiling mad, clear through—and that explained why she'd looked at me the way she had.

I shook my head again, trying to clear it. I was getting mad myself.

"Look, Pat, I can take just so much mysterious crap, and no more," I said, feeling the blood starting to work itself into my face. "I got in from Venus, after winding up one of the prettiest insurrections you ever saw. I got my belly full of the sound of guns and the smell of death, and

all I wanted to do was relax and spend the dough I made. No sooner do I take my first drink of decent liquor in six months than you walk up to me and start the goddamdest mess I've ever been in!

"All right—we made a deal. As far as I know, I've carried out the orders you gave me. I got the job for Transolar, and I started it. Nobody but you and I know there's something funny going on, though I suppose the cops are starting to suspect—seeing as I've killed five men in two days, and helped you knock off two more. Now let's get a few things straight around here! I've been shot at, slugged, and generally treated like a supporting star in a cloak and dagger movie. Either I get some fast answers, or I start slugging!"

I'd been moving forward as I talked, getting madder and madder, and closer to being ready to dive for that gun and rip it out of her hand:

She was starting to lose some of her determination. The gun muzzle was dipping. I reached out my hand.

The gun was centered on me again in an instant, but the fire was gone out of her eyes.

"Hold it, Ash!" she said. "You sound too mad to be lying, but you haven't convinced me yet. Just stay put a minute. You

want to know what's going on? You should have a pretty fair idea by now," she went on, still keeping the gun on me. "I'm after that power pile you're supposed to fly out to Titan. Harry needs it."

I should have known, I suppose. Well, maybe she was still space-struck. Thorsten played rough, and he had some strange friends, but so far he hadn't earned a full-scale visit from the TSN. It didn't mean as much in this case, though. He would have been a tough nut to crack, sitting out there in the Asteroids with a good-sized fleet behind him. Still—

But that was for another time. I let her see by my face that the subject wasn't closed, and then I went on.

"Yeah—keep talking. Who jumped you on Rocket Row last night? Why were you trying to pot me a while ago?"

"Because—goddam it, I don't know *what* to think!" she said. "Those were SBI men last night. I knew they were trailing me, but I thought I'd gotten rid of them before I contacted you. Maybe I did—maybe they picked me up again when I went back out on the street. Anyway, we killed them, but the SBI knows damn well who did it. We did enough yelling back and forth to

let all of New York City know who it was."

That had been a dumb play, all right. I didn't have time to curse my stupidity, though. I didn't care one bit for the idea of me having shot an SBI man. It was his own fault, but it wouldn't help my record any.

"All right," I said, "so they were SBI men. That's tough—for them."

"Why haven't we been picked up? I've been hiding out all day—but how did you get away with walking in Transolar in broad daylight and coming out again, if you didn't make some kind of deal?" She was gnawing on her lip. "Damn it, give me a reasonable explanation, and I'll forget the whole thing."

That sent me off. I knew why I hadn't been picked up, all right—they were waiting for me to blow this deal open for them. Maybe, if I did that, they'd forget I'd killed one of them. I'd have to do a really good job, though.

But I wasn't doing too much reasoning, right then. I'd been mad all night, but that was nothing to what I felt right then.

I could feel a big red ball of pure rage building up inside me. My fingers started to tremble, and my vision got hazy.

I swung out my hand and slapped the muzzle of the gun as

hard as I could, and to hell with what it did to my bum hand. The gun went spinning away, taking skin off her fingers as it went, and crashed into a wall. I swung my hand back and slapped her across the face. She fell back and hit the floor. She lay huddled in a corner, looking up at me, her eyes wide and her mouth open with surprise.

"You'll forget the whole thing, huh? All I have to do is explain away some half-baked idea that came into your head, and you'll forgive me, is that it?" I reached down, grabbed her shoulder, pulled her to her feet, and held her there. Her mouth was still open, and she couldn't get any words out of her throat.

"You're going to *forgive* me for getting me into a deal that involves killing SBI men. You're going to forgive me for having a guy that used to be a buddy of mine hate my guts, I suppose. You're going to forgive me for slapping my face, and I'm going to get your gracious pardon for having to fight it out for my life tonight against five guns. That's just fine! Is that supposed to cover getting shot and knocked around and slugged?"

I hauled back and slapped her again. "And that's for pointing a gun at me! Twice. I live by a gun, and I expect to die by one, someday. But not at the hands

of a woman who can't fight a man on his own terms, and has to keep him off with a gun after she gets herself into a mess. All right—you know how to use one. But, so help me, you wave one of those things at me again, and I'll ram it down your throat catty-cornered!"

I pushed her away, and she slammed back against the wall. "One more thing," I said. "Have you ever heard of the SBI fooling around making deals with a guy that's killed one of their men? Not on your life! They're a tough crew, and a smart one. If they thought I had anything to do with that fracas last night, I'd be on my way to a Federal gas chamber right now, if I was lucky enough to live through the working-over they'd give me! Use your brains!"

She stood against the wall, staring at me, making sounds in her throat. One of her cheeks was starting to puff.

I started for her again. Her eyes got even wider.

"Ash!"

Her voice was high and frightened. Somehow, it cut through the deadly anger in my chest, and made me stop.

"Ash! Please—Ash—I . . ." She put her hands up to her face and stood there, sobbing into them.

My nails were digging into my

palms. I opened my hands, and saw blood running over my knuckles where the tape had torn away. There was some of my blood on her dress, where I'd grabbed her shoulder.

"Ash! Please—I'm sorry— It—it's just that I didn't know what to think."

I don't know how I got over to her, but then I had my arms around her, and she was digging her teeth into the cloth of my shoulder, and sobbing.

"Pat, why do you have to be this way? Why can't you—" I was saying, and stroking that red-brown hair. She wasn't a tough, self-assured woman who could gun a man down without blinking. She was a soft, hurt, crying girl, mumbling through tears, her body shaking.

I wasn't a guy who'd fought his way through a war and countless battles since, either.

She pulled her face away from me, and looked up. Her eyes were wet, but she wasn't scared any more.

I looked down at her. I started to say something, but she stopped me.

"I had it coming, Ash," she said softly. "I didn't trust you. I should have known better."

She half-smiled. "I haven't met too many people who could get worked up over not being trusted."

I couldn't look at her. I was going to have to turn her over to the SBI some day, and I couldn't look at her.

"Ash, remember the night you spanked me? Remember what you did first?"

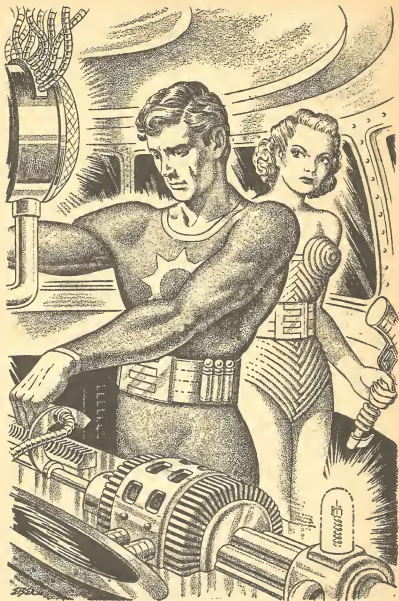
I felt her hand on my face, turning it. Then she was kissing me, her lips soft and fresh, her wet face under my glance, her long lashes down over closed eyes. Her arms moved on my back, and her body was as light as a dream in my arms.

My own eyes closed.

IV

Flight coveralls are designed to be airtight when fully zipped. Hoods with transparent faceplates and oxygen leads can be hermetically sealed to the collars, and every ship has emergency plug-ins for the oxygen tubes. In combat, all spacemen keep their hoods thrown back, like mackinaw hoods, so that if a hole is blown in the hull, they can slip the hoods on and plug into the emergency oxygen supply. Struggling into a full-dress spacesuit is too complicated a job to entrust to the few frantic minutes that spell the difference between life and death, and meanwhile, the coveralls are far more comfortable in flight.

Besides, anyone who'd seen



what a spacesuit does to a figure like Pat's will agree that it's a dirty shame.

While Pat was climbing into her outfit, I was outlining the plan we'd have to follow. As long as I was going to go along with this offer of hers, temporarily, at least, I might as well do it right.

"I got into a cab accident, or something," I said. "That accounts for the shape I'm in. You're an old friend of mine, and since I'm in no condition to fly and fight at the same time, I'm taking you along as co-pilot.

"Weidmann'll stick me for your pay, of course. I'll make sure he does—that way there won't be much kick about you coming along, especially if I make it a 'both or neither' proposition.

"When we get out in space, you show me how to get to Thorsten's bubble in the Asteroids, and that's it. We deliver the pile charge, shoot back out into space, fake the signs of a big battle, and yell for help over the radio. There'll be a squawk about you being a woman then, of course, but hell, us spacebums are supposed to be devil-may-care, aren't we?"

It was a great little plan, all right. It would give SBI the location of Thorsten's base, and it wouldn't hold up delivery of the

pile charge any longer than it would take to salvage it. Meanwhile, space would be rid of Harry.

"Sounds like it'll work, all right," she said. "I wish I was surer the SBI didn't have anything big on me. It'll be a bad enough stink as it is." She grinned. "But we'll make out."

Weidmann was out at the field, fuming over the fact that I was an hour and a half late.

He surprised me, though. He didn't boggle over taking Pat along, once I gave him a story about being lightly hit by a car and having to take my friend along.

Pat had had a tight cloth strapped across her breasts, her hood over her face, and I'd gotten her into the ship fast.

"Okay, okay, who gives a damn what happens to you, as long as the job's done," Weidmann said, but I couldn't believe him, somehow, when he added, "I don't even care who does it, personally."

He slipped an envelope into my pocket. "Something for you," he said. "Don't open it until you're past Mars, and don't let your friend see it—for awhile, anyway." He chuckled, and surprised me by doing it. He looked secretly happy over something, as if he knew about something

awful that was going to happen to me. "You'll have some sweet explaining to do to your friend, Holcomb. I'd love to see it." But there was still that note of something more than laughter, more than most feelings, in his voice.

He wouldn't say more than that. He just shoved me into the ship and slammed the hatch.

I kept watching him in the starboard screens as we checked off the instrument board. He was a little figure at the edge of the field, staring wistfully up at the ship, his mechanical arm in his pocket.

I couldn't wait until we were past Mars to open the letter, of course. We'd be too close to the Belt by then. I read it while Pat was at the controls.

Holcomb:

I don't know exactly why—except that you're the best there is, I guess—but you've been picked for this job.

As you may have guessed, Transolar Express is a blind for some pretty big Government bureaus. This isn't a ship the TSN cancelled, of course. It's a top-secret job built according to the specifications laid down by the Titan labs.

When you hit Titan, turn the ship over to the technicians there, and they'll install the additional equipment that's part of

your cargo of "pile fuels." The rest of your load really is fuel, but it's not meant for the Titan pile—it's for the engines in the ship.

When it's ready, you'll fly the ship to God knows where. You won't refuse, I know, because I wouldn't either, if I'd been given the chance to fly the first ship into hyperspace.

Luck,

Weidmann.

When I'd finished it, I went back to the engine room and took a look at the drive. Then I went to the cargo compartment and stood looking at the hatches. They were sealed—welded shut.

I went back up forward, and waited until Pat had to leave the controls for a few minutes.

The minute she dropped through the hatch I was over at an emergency tool kit, and a few seconds later I was ripping off bulkhead panels with a screwdriver. I got a fast look at banks of dials and instruments, and slapped the panels back up before Pat got back. Then I went down to my cabin and just sat on a bunk, staring at the wall.

That cocky little bastard! That frozen-faced terrier of a man, cursing me with all his heart because I was getting the chance he'd have had, if he hadn't given his right arm too soon!

And he had wished me luck.

I was proud, then, of being an Earthman, of being a fighting man, of having earned the right to get my name in the history books.

I stood there, a big dumb jack-ass.

All of a sudden, it had hit me. I'd been asking a lot of questions lately, and getting only partial answers. Now I had all the answers, and I hated every one of them.

The misdirection and lying on Weidmann's part was clear as a bell. It had been designed to get me off Earth and headed for Titan without anybody knowing the real reasons—even me. They knew that if the real secret ever leaked out, every renegade and pirate in the system would swarm down, battling to the death to get their hands on this ship.

So they pulled the purloined letter gag. They hid the ship and its mission in plain sight. They sent me off in her to deliver the engine parts to where the hyper-spatial drive could be assembled, and from there I'd be able to fly her to whatever star they chose, ghosting along in a universe where the speed of light as we knew it was not the fastest speed a ship could hit.

They'd given me a good excuse, too. "Pile fuels!" A big

enough cargo to justify using me and a special ship, but not so big that I couldn't handle the opposition I'd get from the Belt gangs, who'd fight for it, sure, but who'd try a lot less hard, and discourage a lot easier, than they would if they knew what was really up.

The only trouble with that was that they did know.

Sure—what else could it be? Earth was thick with two-bit sneaks and spies who sold information to anybody with the price. Even Earth government thought enough of them to cook up this big production. One of them must have dug deeper than anyone thought.

Thorsten knew, that was a cinch. He knew so well, that he hadn't even wanted to chance a fight out in space, where the drive might get shot up. He'd sent Pat out to decoy me into him.

I stood there, cursing, my big fists closed into sledges. Pat—Pat, that beautiful, wonderful actress. Pat, who was death with a gun and arson for me with her lips.

All my life, I'd been getting mad at people and things. During the war, I was crazy mad at Marties. Afterward, I was mad at anybody who wanted to push other people around. I got mad-

at Pat, because I thought she was playing me for a sucker.

And Pat had taught me what hatred could do. She'd given me love to replace it.

And played me for a sucker.

I stood there—Ash Holcomb, the toughest man in space, maybe. Not the smartest—no, not the smartest. The dumbest, the stupidest chump who'd ever fallen for the oldest gag in history.

And nobody knew about it. Back on Earth, they were sure they'd gotten away with it. Even Weidmann—Weidmann with the grin, Mort Weidmann who had gone helling around in a hundred dives with me, who didn't need obvious signs like long hair or breasts to spot a woman's figure—he thought everything was all right, too. He was probably shaking his head with envy, back on Earth, thinking of all the fun I'd be having in hyperspace.

Nobody knew the mess the System was in, except me. And nobody could do anything about it, now, except me.

That thought knocked me out of the raging mood I had been working myself into. I couldn't afford to lose my head.

I'd been wondering how Thorsten was going to work a rendezvous right in the middle of the Belt, with renegade Marties that had held out from the war

swarming all over the place, just waiting for a prize like this.

The answer was simple—he'd worked out an alliance with them. Probably the Marties thought they could use it to reconquer the System. If I knew Harry, he had other plans, but they were probably just as bad.

What in hell was I going to do?

One more thought hit me, that was the worst one of all, because it held out an impossible hope.

It was all right to picture Weidmann getting a boot out of me taking a woman along. Under ordinary circumstances, that might have been true. But this was too big, too important. There were two alternatives.

Weidmann must have known I was a D.O. I could assume that. But, knowing how important the job was, Weidmann wouldn't have let Pat come along, no matter what, *if he hadn't thought she and I were working together.*

And that one stopped me cold.
Was she, or wasn't she?

V

What was Pat doing, tied up with Thorsten? She was a high grade operator now, as far from the immature tease I'd known at the Academy as I could imagine. Where had she learned to handle a gun like that? Where had she

gotten the experience that let her handle a job this size by herself?

I couldn't answer that—not any of it, and it was driving me nuts. I stared over the control banks at the forward screen, watching the stars, and beating my brains out.

We'd been out in space for two days, and I hadn't dared to try and find out. You don't, when you're alone with the woman you love.

She was standing next to me, and I looked up at her. The coveralls gave a pretty good indication of what lay beneath, and it was top grade. Not that her figure was that spectacular—she had something more than figures on a tape measure. There was a precision, a slim freshness and freedom to the way one curve flowed into another. It sounds silly, but the way she held herself reminded me of a thing I'd seen once; a rocket transitting the sun, fire sparkling from the shimmering hull, and the Milky Way behind it.

I finally caught what I was trying to phrase; she looked as if she was poised for flight.

She grinned down at me. "Like it?" she asked, chuckling. Her green eyes crackled with light, and there were little demons in her laugh.

I tried to think of a clever

comeback, but I couldn't. I just said, "Yes."

I did like it. And I hated it, at the same time.

The ship was fast, but space is big. I had a week to plan my next moves while we worked our way through the area between Earth and Mars' orbit where the TSN kept the raiders down.

But the week went by, and I didn't think of anything. I'd be working over the control board, and then I'd look up, and she'd be smiling at me. I'd raise an eyebrow, and she'd stick her tongue out. We shared cigarettes. I'd take a drag, hand her the butt, and she'd cuff me when I blew smoke in her face.

"Hey, Goon," she'd say from behind the plotting board, "d'ja hear the one about the lady sociologist who wandered into Bessie's place on Venus?"

I taught her original verses to *The Song of the Wandering Spacemen*. Then she taught me the verses she knew.

We crossed Mars' orbit. I couldn't think of any way to find out what I'd been killing myself over except to ask.

"Ever hear of the D. O.'s?" I asked quietly.

"Will chewing chlorophyll tablets cure 'em?" she asked.

I laughed so hard that I cried.

"I don't think so," I answered

automatically, and got busy checking the breech assembly on one of the ship's rocket launchers.

"Lay off that, apeface," Pat said. "We won't need it."

"How come?"

"If anybody comes around looking unfriendly, just give 'em this on the radio," she said, and whistled off a recognition signal in Martian.

I turned slowly away from the launcher.

Thorsten did have a deal with the Marties. What was more, Pat was in on it. She had to be.

She looked at my face.

"What's the matter, Lump? Something you ate?"

"Sit down, Pat," I said, pointing to the navigation table. "Go on, sit down!" I yelled.

She turned white.

"You know what kind of a ship this is, don't you?" I said, feeling like I was a hundred years old.

"Sure." She nodded. She was beginning to get it. "You weren't supposed to know about that."

"I didn't. Not until we were spaceborne."

Didn't she realize? Couldn't she see what she was doing to me?

"Pat, do you know what'll happen if the Marties get this drive? They'll be able to hit Earth and Venus with everything they've

got, coming out of nowhere and going back into hyperspace when they're through. The TSN won't stand a chance against them."

She shrugged. "They probably would, if they ever got it, but they won't. Harry's going to assemble the drive, install it in his ships, and then we'll take off. The Marties'll be stuck."

"Wait a minute—you just mentioned taking off. Where to?"

She looked up at me. "Harry says there's another planet out in hyperspace, somewhere, circling another star. He says people can live on it." Her eyes were shining, and I remembered a girl on a terrace, back at the Academy, with a dream in her voice that I'd been too dumb to recognize.

"He does, does he? Can he prove it? How do you know what he's really going to do?"

"Because he's told me!" she flared. "He's going to by-pass the fumbling bureaucrats who run things on Earth and take mankind out to the stars—*man*-kind, Ash, the toughest, the strongest men in space, and their women. Space belongs to us, Ash, not to those Earthbound lilies!"

"And whose speech are you repeating?" I said, getting more and more mad every minute. "Thorsten's?"

"Yes!"

"All right, if you think so

God damned much of him, suppose you tell me what he is to you now?" I asked.

"He's my husband." She didn't even hesitate.

I started for her, before I could think of words for the doublecrossing . . .

She came off the navigation table like a coiled spring. She had a gun in her hand.

"Ash—get back! I don't want to hurt you. Ash—can't you see why? Do you think I'm the kind who—?"

I kept coming. "No," I said, "I can't see why. I'm not built so I could see why. And yes, I do think you're the kind."

"I don't know why I had to pick you!" she screamed then. "Maybe I remembered something—maybe I found something out, after it was too late—"

She was crying, but she was bringing the gun up at the same time.

I didn't care. I didn't care if she pulled the trigger or not.

"I told you," I said between my teeth.

She had the gun aimed right at me. Her face was gray, and her hand was shaking.

"I told you the last time what I'd do if you ever pointed a gun at me again." My voice was coming out low, but it had absolutely nothing in it. It was

just words, coming out one by one.

The gun muzzle was shaking badly. She put up her hand to steady it.

"I—" she said. There were tears running down her cheeks in a steady wet stream.

She should have pulled the trigger. I think she should have. But she didn't.

I smashed my fist against the gun, and it was out of her hands, crashing into metal somewhere.

"Ash!" she screamed, and raked her nails across my face.

She kicked up her knee, and fire exploded in my groin. I fell forward, slamming her down on the deck, and threw my entire dead weight across her shoulders.

I didn't have to. Her head had hit the deck, and she lay unconscious, blood seeping out through her hair.

She wouldn't talk to me. She lay on her bunk, her chest rising and falling under the straps I'd buckled around her.

I tried to explain, to make her understand, somehow.

"Pat, I've got a responsibility to the people I work for. I've spent the last ten years keeping characters like Harry Thorsten from taking over this System. It's a rough job, and it's a dirty one. I can't help that. I don't

like it, Pat, it's got to be this way."

She wouldn't talk to me. She wouldn't listen. I walked out of her cabin, locking the door behind me.

Locking a door and forgetting what's on the other side are two different things.

I went up the control room and set a course for Titan. Maybe once we got out there, I'd be able to convince her.

It was a lousy hope. I didn't even understand her—she was like something I'd never seen before. How could she be like she was? How, goddam it, *how*?

VI

Titan lay ahead of me, pursuing its track around Saturn.

My ship drove toward it, flaming out fuel in reckless amounts as I poured on the acceleration. I had to get there fast. We'd already missed our rendezvous time with Thorsten by two days. He was going to figure out what happened—must have done so already—and would be hot behind us. I had to land, get the engines installed, load supplies, and take off into hyperspace before he hit.

It was a race against time. I built up velocity to a point no sane skipper would ever dream of, leaving just enough

fuel to brake with, knowing I wouldn't need it to get back.

Part of me sat in the control room, plotting curves, charting fuel consumption figures on a graph, watching the black line rise hour by hour to the red crayon slash that meant I had done all I could.

And part of me was down in the cabin with Pat, but if I'd let the two parts mix . . .

No ship in the System had ever hit the speed I begged out of my ship's heaving engines. No human being had ever traveled as fast before, tracing his track across the white stars in the blue fire of his jets.

If I made it to Titan in time to get into hyperspace, I would have Pat with me. There'd be stars to look at, and the worlds that circled them. Star on star, marching past the ship, world after spinning world, fair against the stars, and a million things to see, a thousand lifetimes to live.

Out there, where other beings lived, was adventure enough for both of us, and enough of dreaming. Maybe she'd forget Thorsten, maybe some of the things she'd said had been lies, maybe the whisperings in darkness were true.

If I could get to Titan in time.

I might as well have walked.

I knew there was no hope before I finished landing.

Titan was an empty moon. Where the project bubble had been was a circle of fused concrete around a mess of melted alloys. A corpse in a TSN space-suit lay on its back and stared at Saturn.

I looked down at it, cursing, my shoulders slumping under the weight of my helmet.

And I heard the voice on the command frequency.

"Hey—you—you down by the bubble." The voice was weak, and getting weaker.

"Yeah!" I shouted into my mike.

"Holcomb?"

"Yeah, for Christ's sake! Where are you?"

"Your right—about a hundred yards. Start walking over here. I'll talk you in."

I started off at a lope, kicking my way over the rough ground. That voice was pitifully weak.

I found him, curled around a rock, his head and arm supported on a rifle that was leaned against the stone.

"Holcomb—"

"Yeah." He couldn't even turn his head to look at me.

"I'm Foster—Lou Foster. Commanding, Marine guard detail."

I remembered him. The one who filled a practice football with water.

"Yeah, Lou. How's it?"

"No damn good at all, Ash. I've been waiting for you."

"Thorsten?"

"Yeah—our old classmate, Harry the horse. About thirty-fourty hours back."

"You been in that thing all this time!"

"Sure—snap, if you breathe shallow and don't drink anything. Helps to have a couple of spare tanks." He could still try to chuckle.

"Well, hell, guy, let's get you over to my ship."

"No can do, Ash. No sense to it."

I was straining to hear the words now, even with his set right next to mine. I knelt down and touched helmets with him.

"Listen, Ash—he's got the stuff. The diagrams, the charts, the figures—everything. He's even got the tech detail to put it together for him."

"All right, Lou. It figured. But can the yak. Come on, boy, over my shoulder you go, and down to the can with you."

"Lemme lay! Goddam it, quit tryin' to move me! I didn't walk over here—I got flung when the dome let go!" He was screaming.

"Sorry, Lou!"

"S'all right." He bubbled a chuckle. "I see by my infallible little TSN instruments that I'm

gonna run outta breathin' material 'na couple minutes. 'S'all right by me. Luck to ya, Ash."

"Yeah."

But he didn't strangle. He didn't choke in his helmet; there was still air in his tanks when he died.

I went back to my ship and sat behind the control board, smoking a cigarette. I rubbed a hand across my tired eyes, and wondered what I was going to do next.

Thorsten had thought of everything. He couldn't have found technicians to assemble the drive anywhere else, so he'd come out here and kidnapped them. That was an elementary move, obviously planned far in advance.

I'd been running a useless race. I would have realized it long ago, if I hadn't been half-crazy about Pat.

She laughed at me when I told her about it, but she laughed in a peculiar way.

"I could have told you," she said, laughing. "Ash Holcomb, the big undercover agent, heading like mad for Titan! And what does he find?"

"I found Lou Foster, Pat," I said, feeling the steel in my voice slicing upward in my throat.

"That wasn't anybody's fault!"

she said quickly. "He happened to get in Harry's way."

"Go tell Andrea Foster," I said.

"Stop it, Ash! You can keep bringing up horrible examples, but it still doesn't mean anything, compared to travel to the stars."

"What was wrong with the way it was going to be done?" I asked.

But she was pulling her protective shell of mockery around her again. "Oh, stop it, Ash! You're licked, and now you're trying to justify it by claiming foul, the way losers always have."

But the last thing she said, as I slammed out of the cabin, was: "This time, you got the spanking, Ash. Now stop crying about it." But somehow, she didn't sound as happy as she'd probably expected.

I took the ship back out into space, finally, heading Sunward. All I could do was hope I'd get within radio range of a TSN ship before Thorsten found me.

But that didn't happen. I wasn't anywhere near the Belt when I had to sit and watch Thorsten's fleet come flaming at me out of space and surround my ship, sliding into tight courses that held me on a deadly and invisible leash.

And I could feel things crum-

bling inside me. All the principles the Academy had built in, and love, and fear—remorse, friendship, bravery—none of it meant anything. They were things that human hearts and minds were capable of, but when yesterday's love is today's revulsion, when friends are deadly enemies, when all the world thinks of you as just another space bum—what then? I had the destiny of the System riding in the holds behind me, and nobody really knew or cared that I'd break my heart to keep it safe.

They were my eyes, but they weren't altogether normal, as I stared out of the control room screens at the waiting fleet.

They kept their distances. They all had their launchers pointed at me, and on a few of the old T Class rack-mounts I could see the homing torps lying in wait on the flat upper decks.

I went back to Pat's cabin. She was sitting up on her bunk, staring at me. Fire lay buried deep in her eyes, but she kept her face smooth.

"Okay, Pat," I said. "Thorsten's got his crew in a globe around me. He wants this ship. Should I give it to him?"

What I was saying didn't match my voice. I was tired, and mad, and I couldn't look at her.

I could feel my lower teeth sliding back and forth against my upper ones.

"No—I know you too well, Ash," she said. "Not the way you'd give it to him." She pushed herself up and stood in front of me. Her eyes kept getting wider and wider. "Ash! You're crazy. If you think you can fight your way out of this—" her voice broke. "You know you don't have a chance. I've seen Harry's fleet in action. This is one ship, Ash—one ship!"

Her entire body was radiating urgency. She was standing stiff-legged, every muscle quivering, trying to get her words through the desperate red haze that was building up in front of my eyes. I couldn't see her very clearly.

But I could see her well enough to laugh at her.

"Fight?" I said. "*Fight?* I've had fighting—all the fighting I'm ever going to do. I've been fighting too much, too often. I had a name and a friend, once—and I had a girl, once, too. Now all I've got is a job, and some orders, and a conscience, maybe. No—I'm not going to fight." I threw back my head and laughed again. I reached out and grabbed her arm. "Come on—you're going to have a grandstand seat."

I pulled her up the companion-way and into the control room,

and threw her into the co-pilot's seat. I pulled out my gun.

"Reach for those controls," I said, "and I'll blow your hand off." She sat in the chair, her face gray, staring out at Thorsten's fleet.

I reached over and switched the radio to Thorsten's frequency.

"Thorsten!"

"Yes, Holcomb?"

His, too, wasn't quite the same voice it had been. It was even, clipped, used to commanding a crew that didn't enjoy being commanded.

"I've got Pat," I said, keeping my gun on her.

"Let's stick to relevancies, Holcomb. How much for the ship?"

He'd given himself away! I could have laughed.

"No, Thorsten, let's keep it where I want it—how much for Pat?"

There was a pause on the other transmitter. I was playing my cards right. Thorsten had me, and the ship. But I had his wife, and that was swinging the scales my way. Why should he offer to pay me, now? A bluff? No—he had a better one in the ships, with their launchers ready. Why should he be willing to dicker for the ship? Because she was in it, that was why. If I refused to give up, he could always blow

me out of space, or take the ticklish chance of trying to disable the ship without wrecking the engines. But he wasn't going to do that. Pat was worth too much to him.

"Thorsten! You heard me—how much for your wife?"

He cursed me. His voice was a lot lower than it had been.

"I've got a gun on her, Thorsten."

Suddenly, he sighed. "All right, Holcomb. You win—but not as much as you'd think. I'll make a deal."

I laughed at him, still keeping my gun pointed at Pat with a rock-steady hand. "What am I supposed to think you've *been* doing, Thorsten?"

It was getting to be too much for me. I could feel all the pressure that had built up in the last ten days starting to come to a head, ready to explode and to hell with who the pieces hit.

"Oh, no, Thorsten—no deals. No bargains, no sell-outs, no compromises. I'm up to here on doublecrossing and crisscrossing. I hired out to you and Transolar, and before that I hired out to anybody who had money or a chance for me to get some. And all the time, I was hired out to Earth government. I've had too many jobs, Thorsten—my gun's been on the line too long. There are too many oaths and too many

loyalties. Too much of my honor's been spread from one end of the System to the other. Now I'm quitting. The towel's going in, and from now on, it's me that I fight for."

I had the mike up against my mouth, and I was yelling into it. "I know what you're going to offer me, Thorsten. I know what I'd offer. You want the girl and the ship. You want one as bad as the other, but you won't settle for half. So you're offering me my life, and a free ride to Earth. Well, you can take that deal and stuff it. Earth! Who the hell would want to live on the Earth you'd leave, after you and your Martie friends got through with it. No, Thorsten, it's no bargain. It's a Heads you win, Tails I lose proposition, no matter how you slice it."

I laughed again, enjoying it, because it was going to be my last laugh.

"Holcomb!" He must have guessed what I was working myself up to do, because there was sheer desperation in his voice, but I cut him off.

"Shut up, Harry! I told you I was quitting. You know the racket I'm in. You don't just quit it. You go out with your hand on the wheel and your jets full on. *And here I come!*"

I fed flame into my portside jets, throwing the mike away

from me as I grabbed the controls. The ship arced over, singing her death-song in snapping stanchions and straining plates, in the angry howl of the converters, in the drumfire of jets that coughed and choked as fuel poured into them, but which opened their throats and belowed just the same.

"Ash!" That was Pat.

"Holcomb!" That was Thorsten.

But I was pure metal-jacketed, fireborne death, howling silently toward the sleek cruiser that was Thorsten's flagship, the best known and most feared silhouette in space.

The gates of Hell opened in space. Every ship in the hemisphere ahead of me vomitted fire as the ones behind me and beside me lanced out of the way of the arrowing missiles.

There was no way for Thorsten to avoid me. Fire blossomed at the throats of his jets, and the flagship shot forward.

I snarled, twisted the wheel, and kept my nose pointed for his bridge.

Proximity torps began exploding all around me. They weren't doing Thorsten a bit of good. Either they hit me, or, without air to carry the shock, they were as good as not there at all.

"Here's your hyperspacial

drive, Harry!" I howled. "Here it comes—compliments of Ash Holcomb, hired gun!"

Suddenly a missile exploded under my bow. It was a clean hit. The ship screamed escaping air, and shuddered, bucking upward. It wasn't just stanchions ripping loose now, or buckling plates. It was snapping girders, and metal spewing out into space like teeth from a broken mouth. The trouble board winked solid fire at me.

I didn't care about that. The ship was unhurt in the only place that counted—her engine room—and the stern jets kept firing. But I was bent over the wheel, sobbing in pure, white-hot, frustrated rage, because I was going to miss. I'd been slammed up off my trajectory high enough to miss, and Thorsten's ship was firing every tube he had to drive herself down and away, behind a protective screen of other ships.

I could hear the hysterical relief in Thorsten's laugh over the radio.

I could hear something else, too. It hadn't mattered what Pat did, once I'd swung the ship into line. I couldn't have pulled it out of the collision course myself. It had taken an atomic rocket to blast me out of the way.

But it was different, now.

I was folded over the wheel, blood running down my chin

from my bitten lip, my knuckles aching as I tightened my fists.

Pat said: "Ash—I'm sorry." There was a sob in her voice. "But you won't give up," she stumbled on. "You'll never give up, until you and Harry are both dead. And I couldn't stand losing both of you."

I never knew what she hit me with, but the back of my skull seemed to explode inward, and I slid out of the seat to the deck. I started crawling toward her. She sobbed, but she hit me again.

VII

The fleet had scattered back to the hundreds of hidden berths among the farflung Asteroids. I came awake in a pressurized burrow dug out in the particular rock Thorsten had chosen for himself and his crew. I'd been dropped in a corner and searched down to my shorts. There wasn't anything on me that I could use for a weapon.

Except—no, I caught myself before there was even a quiver in my left arm. Now wasn't the time to press against my ribs, to try to feel the almost imperceptible bulge of the singleshoot capsule between my ribs.

I groaned and let my eyes flicker open.

"How's it, Ash?"

I looked up. Thorsten was

standing a few feet away from me, looking down from under his spreading black eyebrows.

I put my hand up to my head. "Crummy. She hits hard."

Harry chuckled.

He wasn't a specially big man, but he was large enough. He had deep black eyes under his brows, an aristocratic nose that had been broken, a slightly off-center mouth whose lower lip was tighter on one side than the other, and a firm jaw. His hair was black—almost as black as mine, and as short. He hadn't changed much.

His voice started in the pit of his stomach, and worked its way up. When he chuckled, the sound was almost operatic, deeper than I remembered it.

"Why shouldn't I kill you, Holcomb?" he said.

I climbed to my feet, and looked into those probing eyes. "Go ahead. Give me half a chance, and I'll kill you."

He laughed. "The old school tie," he said. His voice dropped an octave. "Relax, Holcomb. You're alive, for the time being. Come on, let's get some food."

He reached out and slapped me on the back.

Thorsten's mess hall was another pocket in the Asteriod. It was connected to the burrow I'd been in by a tunnel in the rock, and as we walked down it, I'd

had a chance to get quick looks into branching corridors and other burrows that were machine shops, arsenals, ration dumps, and living quarters. Just before we turned into the mess hall, I caught a glimpse of an airlock hatch at the end of the tunnel. That was where Thorsten's ship had to be—and my own, too, unless I missed my guess.

As long as I had a functioning mind, I was going to use it. Automatically, a map of as much of the layout as I'd seen was filed away in my brain.

The mess hall must have been the largest single unit in the entire chain of burrows that honeycombed the Asteriod. It was lit by clamp-on units, like the rest of the place, but the lamps were spread a little farther apart, so it was darker. Even so, I could see that most of the space was filled with men sitting at the long mess tables.

"Quite a setup, isn't it, Holcomb?" Thorsten asked, leading me toward a table that was slightly set apart from the others.

"Looks like an improved standard TSN base," I said.

Thorsten chuckled again. He must have liked the sound of it.

"In many ways, that's more or less what it is," he said, sounding pleased.

We got to the table, and stopped.

All the other mess tables ran end to end from the far side of the burrow to this. Thorsten's table was set at right angles to the others, and a separate chair that was obviously his was placed so that he could look over all the other men. The table had a snow-fresh cloth on it, and was set in high-polish silver. Heavy napkins lay beside each of the places. I glanced down at the other tables. They were bare-boarded, but that wasn't going to make much difference to the men sitting at them.

But all of that took about half a minute's looking. What stopped my eye cold was Pat, dressed in an elaborate gown, seated at one end of Thorsten's table.

"Stop staring, Ash," Thorsten said, the laughter running under his words like the whisper of a river. "Let's not keep our hostess waiting."

"Hello, Pat," I said as I walked over to the chair that Thorsten indicated was mine. I was sitting next to her.

She half-smiled, but her eyes were uncertain. "Hello, Ash." She glanced quickly over toward Thorsten, who had reached his own chair.

Thorsten stopped next to the chair and laid his hand on its back. It was a signal.

"Attention!"

A paradeground voice near the door wiped out every other sound in the hall.

There were close to six hundred men in the mess hall. All of them were suddenly on their feet, snapping to, the sound of boots on rock thundering through the burrow. The men faced each other across the long tables, staring straight ahead.

The successive crashes of sound died out. I stood casually next to my place. Pat was the only seated person in the hall.

Thorsten stood where he was, his hand still on the chair, looking out over his men. The silence held.

"All right, men. Let's eat," Thorsten said casually. There was another roll of sound through the hall as six hundred men sat down and long platters of hot food were rushed out to them by table orderlies.

Thorsten and I sat down, and the three of us at the table faced each other.

"Enjoy the show?" I asked Thorsten. He came back with a peeved look.

It was my turn to chuckle, but I had enough sense to keep it inside. I was right back to not being sure of what to think, as far as Pat was concerned. How much of our affair had been

pure bait, and how much of it did Harry know about?

He motioned to a waiting orderly, who stepped forward and poured wine into the crystal goblets beside our plates. Thorsten reached forward and picked his up. "A toast, Holcomb!" The black eyes bored into mine. I picked up my glass.

Thorsten turned toward Pat and raised his glass. I looked at her. Her face was pale, and her eyes were oddly urgent. She couldn't seem to take them off Thorsten's face.

"To my wife!" Thorsten said, and drained his glass.

I drank out of my own. It was good Burgundy—cold and dry in my mouth, and warm as it came down my throat. I set the glass gently down. If Thorsten was expecting me to react, he was disappointed.

But he was laughing, the sound echoing through the burrow, none of the men paying any attention to it. I looked at Pat.

"Another toast!" Thorsten's glass had been refilled.

"To Ash Holcomb—hired gun and angel of death!" He was laughing at me, and at Pat. He knew, or guessed, and death was lightly hidden by his laughter.

"Don't do it, Holcomb!"

Thorsten's voice was ice. I

looked at my hands. They were hooked into talons, and I realized that there wasn't a muscle in my body that wasn't tensed and ready to cannon me across the table. I could even hear the snarl rumbling at the base of my throat.

I looked to the side. A man with an open holster flap was standing there, his eyes locked on me.

"Do what, Harry," I asked casually, "propose another toast?"

He looked uncertain for a moment. Then the smile and the laugh came on, and Thorsten was Thorsten again. He didn't know about the chained lightning that was running in my arteries instead of blood. He was a dead man as he sat there, and he didn't know it. In a way, that was funny enough to me to keep waiting.

"A toast? It certainly is a night for toasts, isn't it?" Thorsten murmured.

Pat hadn't moved, and stopped looking at him. I didn't know if she'd looked at me when I was ready to go for Thorsten's throat—but I didn't think so. Now she smiled. I wonder how much it cost her because her lower lip was gray where she'd had it between her teeth.

I had my glass refilled. I nodded toward Pat—and gave Thorsten the Academy toast. "Here's

to space, and the Academy. To stars, to the men that walk them, and to the flaming ships that fly."

I looked at Thorsten for the first time since I'd raised my glass, and it was my turn to laugh.

He was gray, and somehow smaller in his throne-like chair. He stared across the table at me, and then let his eyes fall. Hesitantly, he spread the fingers of his hand, and looked at the pale circle where the ring had been.

And, incredibly, he laughed.

"Score one for the opposition," he chuckled. "Nice going, Ash."

I laughed with him, keeping it on a casual plane. I'd done what I wanted to—hit him where he lived. Now, if I could give the conversation a nudge in just the right direction, I might be able to start him talking about his plans. I was that much closer to an outside chance to do something about them.

"What happened, Harry?" I asked. "How'd you get from the TSN into being the top man in the Belt?"

He bit. While Pat and I sat there, Pat nervously shifting her glance from him to me, and me not daring to look at her because of the things I'd say to myself, he told his story. The orderlies brought our dinner, putting

dishes down and taking them away as he talked between mouthfuls.

"They don't talk much about me, I guess," he began. "It's a pretty ordinary story, anyway. I was in the war, with my own squadron. We ran into some bad luck, combined with a set of orders that got mixed up. I lost my men. I lost a leg, too."

He leaned down and slapped his right thigh. It rang with metal. "I didn't enjoy that. While I was in the hospital, they brought charges against me. I wasn't given time to prepare an adequate defense, and they threw several paragraphs of the book at me. I was dropped a rank in grade, and slated for duty at a procurement office. I got my break, then. The Marties, under Kull, hit the Moon at practically that time."

I remembered that. They'd gotten a toehold and established a forward base, and Earth had started getting hit with atomic missiles.

"All of a sudden, anybody who could walk or be carried into a ship was tossed into a raggle-taggle fleet the TSN dredged up. That included me."

He grinned. "Only they made two mistakes. The first one was in thinking I still owed Earth any kind of a debt. The second was the bigger one—they gave

me a crew raked out of every brig and detention barracks in the fleet. I guess they didn't think I was fit to command anything else."

He grinned. "Pat was in a Wasp unit attached to the base. I took her along."

He waved his hand at the men in the mess hall. "Some of my original crew are still with me. I simply headed for the Belt, and sat out the war. The boys didn't mind one bit. We had plenty of stores, and they knew nobody would bother us while there were more important things going on. Afterwards—well, we've done all right."

He had. Some of the freight lines bribed him. Some didn't.

Uncounted millions in rare minerals were scattered among the tumbling rocks of the Belt, but nobody dared to mine them. He'd given refuge to the stragglers from Mars' broken navies, and built a kingdom on blood and loot.

"I know what I'm called on Earth," he said. "I'm a butcher, a brigand—all the names there are. Even another fighting man, like you, Holcomb, thinks I'm a renegade and a traitor to humanity for throwing in with the Marties. Well, they're blind, Holcomb!"

His open palm came cracking

down on the table. "They can't see that Earth is rotten to the very marrow in its mis-shapen bones, that any system that would do to a man what it did to me is based on stupid bungling! The war—Holcomb, you were in that, you know it was the most useless piece of imperialism the System has ever seen."

He was staring intently into my face. I did him the favor of keeping my expression blank, but if he expected me to nod, he was going to wait a long time. I couldn't help thinking of Mort Weidmann. Mort left an arm on Mars; he wasn't bitter about that, and he didn't think it had been a useless war. It had been the Marties for System bosses or us, and they wouldn't have been gentle overlords.

But Thorsten was going on, and now he'd gotten to the part I wanted to know.

"There's got to be a change, Holcomb. Humanity isn't fit to go out to the stars the way it is. It's not ready for the hyper-spatial drive.

"It's not going to get it."

I was beginning to understand. Most important, I could finally understand what was wrong with Thorsten. I could see the Messiah complex building up in front of my eyes. The laugh—the easy, chuckling, self-assured laugh—the laugh of a man

who was never wrong, and knew it.

"I've got the drive, Holcomb, and I'm going to use it. *I'll* be the standard-bearer of the human race among the stars. There won't be any fumbling and bumbling—no bureaucrats, Holcomb, no splinter groups, no special interests, no lobbies."

The dream was like a banner in his eyes.

"Nobody but you, right?" I said.

"Right!" the palm went down on the table again. The wine was beginning to loosen him up. His voice was losing the first fine edge of control.

And I finally understood about Pat. She was looking at Thorsten, and the same dream was plain on her face. That was all she saw—that, and the man. She couldn't see the gray rockets belching above the burning cities.

"*Have* you got the drive?"

"Damn right! Those technicians I lifted from Titan are working on your ship now. Then a test flight, and after that, a whole fleet—my fleet, equipped with the drive and ready for the jump.

"There's a planet out there, Holcomb. The Titan Project found it. A planet, Holcomb! Earth-type! Do you think I'd let those idiots on *Earth* have it!"

That locked it up. He was completely paranoid.

Pat was still looking at him, lost in the dream. She couldn't be bought, and she couldn't be taken. But she could be in love. Maybe, as a man, I stacked higher up with her than Thorsten did—but I couldn't rival the Dream.

"Seems to me a thing like that will take more supplies than generations of intercepting freight would give you. Where'll you get your equipment?" I asked.

I'd timed it right. A lot of Burgundy had gone down, followed by Sauterne and Chablis.

"That's where my Martian—friends come in," he said. Pat leaned forward. This was a part she'd never heard before, an answer to a question nobody but an old hand at expeditionary forces would ask.

"The Marties think they're going to get the System back, some day." He laughed. "They've been trying to persuade me to help them for a long time, now. Well, I'm going to. After my fleet has the drive. We'll invade Earth, then. The TSN won't be able to stand up to us—not when torps start coming out of nowhere. Picture it—all of Earth, busy fighting us off, all its attention on the invasion, and on nothing else. Then, when the

fighting's going nicely, my men and I will raid a few choice supply dumps I've had spotted for a long time. We'll load up on equipment and supplies, and take off, leaving some badly disconcerted Marties to finish their little revolt any way they want to—with no Earth for them to conquer!"

"What?" It ripped out of me. Pat was sitting there, her mouth open too, the same stunned question written on her face.

Thorsten laughed his omnipotent laugh again.

"Certainly! Didn't you know, Holcomb? Ordinarily, of course, a hyperspatial ship will take off from a planet on standard atomic drive, and cut to her hyperspatial engines when it's out in deep space. But it's possible to take off directly into hyperspace—the only trouble being that the warp changes a hundred cubic miles of adjacent mass to C-T matter."

"Seetee! You mean contraterrene?" That was Pat, tense-faced.

I couldn't say anything. I sat there, staring at Thorsten—calm, laughing, deliberate bringer of death to a world and its billions.

Because C-T atoms, in contact with normal matter, reacted violently. A hundred cubic miles, detonating instantaneously, would leave a ring of dust

where Earth and Moon now swung.

"There will be no cancer of humanity in space!" Thorsten declared.

I jumped for him.

One slug caught my shoulder. The other plowed through the muscles of my back. I lay bleeding among the broken glass and dishes on the table. Thorsten swung a rabbit punch at my head, and laughed.

VIII

The cell was small, dark, and damp. There were stitches across my back, under tape, and a traction splint and bandages on my shoulder. Let's forget pain. Pain . . . *Let's forget it! Forget it!*

I lay on my belly. I'd been on my belly for most of a week. And for most of a week, I'd thought of how it would be to dig my fingernails into my side, rip loose the phony skin over my ribs, and fire that one shot into Thorsten's guts.

All I needed was a chance. Here in the cell, in a corridor somewhere, alone with him, surrounded by his men, chance of life or no—that wasn't what counted. I wasn't sane myself, anymore. There were two people in the Universe—Thorsten and me—and room for one!

A chance. Lord God, a chance!

But all I had was dampness and darkness.

I was fed twice a day—or something like it. It was almost time for my next meal; but that wasn't the important time. It was the helpless week behind me, the week in which Thorsten's kidnaped technicians had had time to assemble the ship's engines. The test flight was due, and after that the production of engines for the other ships in Thorsten's fleet. If I was going to do anything, I had to do it now.

I dragged myself up the side of the cell, leaving meat from my fingers on the rough stone. I staggered over to the wall beside the door and waited.

Time went by—hours or minutes—and a sound of feet came down the tunnel leading to my cell.

I couldn't use my back muscles, but I tensed them now, feeling stitches give way.

Tumblers clicked, and the door was opened.

I kicked it shut and sprang, wrapping my hands around a dimly seen throat, a thin and soft neck.

"Ash!" Pat's voice was half-choked under my grip.

"Pat!" I opened my hands, and she stumbled free. But not

for long, because an instant later she was pressed against me again, her mouth over mine.

We stood together in the darkness and in hunger. Finally, she moved her lips away.

"Ash, Ash, you can stand!" She was sobbing with relief.

"Yeah—I'm on my feet."

"Can you fight?"

"Nothing bigger than you," I said. "What's going on?"

"He's crazy, Ash. That plan of his—I'd never heard it before. All he told me was that he was going to take humanity out to the stars—he said he didn't trust Earth government to do it."

"Yeah. I know. For that dream, I would have done what you did, too."

"I didn't love him, Ash. He—I don't know, he *was* his dream, somehow, and in spite of it all, he was a better, stronger man than anyone I ever knew. Except you, Ash."

That was good enough. That was good enough to give her everything I had or could get. And that made my spot even worse. It wasn't just she that was going to get hurt—but she was the most important one of them all.

I couldn't even stay with her, here in the cell.

But she knew that too, and

there was more to her coming here than that.

"Ash—they've finished assembling the drive in your ship. They've finished repairs on her bow, too. They're going to run the tests in a few hours. Everybody's sleeping, except for the maintenance crew, and they're scattered through the base. Ash—I think we can get out of here. If we don't run into any guards, we can make it to the airlock. There'll be a few suits in a locker there. We can make a run for the ship." Her voice was urgent, and full of hope, and bitterness for the desertion of a dream—a sick, tainted dream, but her dream for so many years at Thorsten's side.

And I knew, for the first time in weeks, that Earth had a chance. I knew, too, that Pat and I . . .

I could have kissed her then. But I had to be a damned fool. I didn't.

The tunnels and corridors were empty. The machine shops and storage rooms were dark, and the doors to the bunkrooms were closed. We reached the airlock.

All I had to do now was to get into a spacesuit and open the lock. The ship lay beyond it.

Then I heard Harry's laugh!

He stood behind us, holding a slim handgun.

"Running out, people?" he

asked. "Bribing that orderly wasn't bright, Pat. He not only gets to keep his money, but he gets a promotion from me. That's the way I operate—that's my justice."

Pat and I had turned half-way around, watching him carefully.

"Justice!" Pat flared. "Worry some more about Earth. Worry about the Universe. Teach them your justice!"

Again the laughter. "I will, Pat."

But the laughter broke.

"Pat—you're my wife. You know my dream—you shared it. Why did you do it?"

"Yes, she knows your sick dream, Harry," I said.

"Shut up, Ash;" he said quietly. "Don't die with your mouth open."

He fired, but I was on the floor of the tunnel.

"Ash!" That was Pat's voice, but I was rolling, and tearing at my side.

"Get back, Pat!" Thorsten shouted. I was up on my knees, the singleshot gun in my hand. I charged forward.

He brought up his gun. The noise had awakened everybody in hearing distance. Doors were opening, men were running.

I pointed the slim tube at his belly and jammed my thumb down on the firing stud.

He screamed, cupping his hand

over the smoking hole I had punched in his stomach. His knees bent, and he sank backwards, toppling, finally, as he lost his balance. He opened his mouth, choking, and blood welled over his chin.

One last shred of laughter bubbled up through his throat.

And someone, down at the other end of the tunnel, fired at us. He missed me as I crouched over Thorsten's body.

"Ash—"

I had Thorsten's gun in my hand, but I didn't fire back. I spun around, and looked at Pat, crushed back against the tunnel wall.

"Pat!"

She slid down the wall, and huddled on the floor.

"Pat!" I bent down beside her. It was bad.

Her voice was thick. "How long have I got?"

"Five minutes—maybe ten." I knew I was lying. It was less.

"Ash . . . you heard what he said, I was in a Wasp unit. Space was my dream, too. Always."

I wanted to tell her I knew, now—knew a lot of things. But there was no use in holding a dying woman, kissing her, and caressing her tumbled hair for one last time. No use at all, when a world depended on not taking time for those things.

I put Thorsten's gun in her

hand. "Can you still shoot, Pat?"

Her fingers tightened on the butt, and her eyes met mine just once more before she turned her head.

She was a beauty to watch. Sprawled on the tunnel floor, not looking at anything but targets over the notch of her sights, calm and skilled while she covered my retreat as her heartbeats slowed. She cauterized the tunnel, weaving a fan of death that marched down the corridor, encompassing and moving beyond huddled and broken men.

I clamped on my suit helmet and spun the airlock controls. I snapped one quick look back at her. Then the airlock hatch thudded shut behind me. In a moment, I was on the surface of the Asteroid and running for the ship.

IX

Earth lies ahead of me, green and safe. The muted atomics behind me have brought me back from beyond Venus, where the split-second jump into hyper-space threw me.

Let Mort Weidmann have his farther stars—or anyone else who cares to try. I've had all I want from the new drive.

I gave Pat a funeral pyre. And now the lonely Asteroids have a star of their own.

HOME IS THE SPACEMAN

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

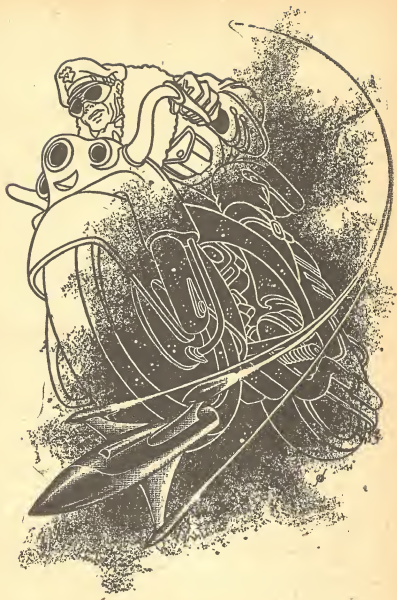
Enright was coming home, which should have been good, since he was the first Earthman ever to go faster than light. But when he'd been gone eighteen months in a ship that was supplied for only ten days, the authorities were just a trifle curious. . . .

Test Pilot Billy Enright looked down at the Earth so far below and decided that home had never looked so good to any man. He and his experimental spacecraft had exceeded the speed of light, he had crossed the monstrous gulf between stars, and for eighteen months Billy Enright had walked upon the earth-like planet of another star. He had driven faster, gone farther, and stayed away longer than any other human, and now he was happy to be arrowing down towards Mother Earth and home.

Mingled excitement and joy tickled his stomach. There would be one royal explosion when he

called in for landing instructions; he was going to create as much fuss as Tom Sawyer had caused a couple of hundred years ago when he and his boys turned up at their own funeral services. For Billy Enright had been overdue for eighteen months on a flight-plan calling for a twelve-hour program. He had probably been listed as "Missing" for more than sixteen of the eighteen months.

It would be more dramatic if he just barrelled down unannounced and walked in to the commandant's office with an air of unconcern. But on the other hand, the story he had to tell about his flight and the explana-



tion of his overdue return wanted a large audience whose minds had already recovered from the first shock. So instead of letting shock pile upon shock, Billy Enright flipped the radio on and called:

"Interstellar Spacecraft One calling Mojave Base. I. S.-1 calling Mojave. Test Pilot Enright requesting landing instructions. I. S.-1 over."

Forty seconds later—Enright was still so far from Earth that the radio waves took twenty seconds to travel in each direction—his receiver chattered into life and an excited voice spluttered, "Billy Enright—where the—er—Mojave Operations to I. S.-1. Look, Enright—we—My God!"

There was an abrupt click and another, calmer voice took over. "Captain Enright from Mojave. Commodore Hogan here. Are you all right? Any distress? Hogan over."

Enright snapped the "talk" button and said: "Enright to Commodore Hogan. Good morning, Commodore. I am not in distress. I am in more than fine shape and glad to be coming in. Please slip me the landing instructions so that I can kiss Mother Earth softly and gently and walk away from my ship, will you? Also will you please notify my parents that I am all in one healthy piece and that I

will be seeing them as soon as I can? Enright over."

Billy Enright spent the next forty seconds wondering what kind of a stew was going on down at Base. He made a mental bet that there were wires burning and tables being pounded.

Commodore Hogan's voice came back. "Mojave to I. S.-1. You will land on Runway Nine. Ceiling and visibility unlimited. Wind Northeast at four miles. Barometer twenty-nine point seven. Traffic: Luna Three taking off, one Orbital Station Shuttle in flight pattern. All other traffic being held. You will land, Captain Enright, and then you will seal your spacecraft for investigation and inventory. You will not log in at Operations, but present yourself to the Officer of the Day to deliver your report and explanations. You will not converse with anyone or discuss your—ah, adventures, until you have been granted permission. Confirm this, Captain Enright. Hogan over."

Billy grabbed the microphone and snapped, "Enright to Base. Look, Commodore, I confirm the landing instructions and will comply with the personal orders, but aren't you overlooking the fact that an experimental mission, undertaken with calculated risk, with success highly controversial, cannot be subject to

strict timetable? You sound as though I'm being charged with awol." Enright pronounced the initial letters as a word.

The reply came, as formal as before. "Mojave to Enright. There has been no formal charge of being absent without official leave logged against you, Captain Enright. All official action will be held in abeyance until your account has been reviewed by the Court of Inquiry, which will convene upon your arrival. Mojave Operations, Commodore Hogan in command, over and off!"

Billy Enright grunted. Commodore Hogan was a boiled collar and if he wanted to play this game as though he had caught one of his men buzzing a State Capitol Building instead of being delayed on a mission across the galaxy by half-a-hundred light years, then he, Billy Enright, was more than willing to go along.

Enright set the interstellar spacecraft down on the runway without a bump and rode the brakes to a stop. With a resentful flourish he parked his hat at an angle on his skull, ironed his cheerful features into a mirthless stoneface, and left his ship. He sealed the spacelock carefully. Then he dropped to the concrete parking block and waited for the official spaceport car

to come along the taxiway for him.

The driver greeted him with a grin. "Glad to see you back, Captain." He held out a hand which Enright shook firmly. "How was it—out There?"

The other man in the car frowned and snapped, "Captain Enright, do not answer! Mister Forrester, you will open and show me your right hand!"

Enright grunted. He knew the other man and so he said, "Look, Tom, I'm not playing any games. Or should I address you as Executive Horne? I did not pass Ed Forrester any notes, data, or pictures. I was merely shaking hands."

"We're all under orders," said Horne. "And your orders are to say nothing to anybody. Even me."

"Call me Captain Clam," said Billy Enright. "Is there any ruling against you passing me a cigarette?"

"Er—Mister Forrester, you will witness this. I have been asked for a cigarette. I am going to comply. However, you will note carefully that Captain Enright did light this cigarette and smoke it, thus burning its contents and obviating any possible exchange of information from me to him. Agreed?"

Enright blurted: "What the hell am I, a prisoner of war?"

"No comment. Please follow your orders," said Executive Horne. He did hold out a lighter for Enright, who puffed deeply with appreciation. The car delivered them to the Administration Building of Mojave Spaceport by the time Enright finished his smoke. He snubbed the butt carefully and handed it to the driver, along with a small pile of gray ash. "Preserve these remains, Mister Forrester. At least until I have been paroled. Affirmed, Executive Horne?"

"Affirmed. Now, come along, Captain."

He led Billy Enright into the building and upstairs, along a corridor and into a large conference room. Enright looked at a long table, around which were most of the big gold braid of Mojave Spaceport, a couple of space admirals from his project—Operation Interstellar—and three men in conservative business dress. The man at the head of the table was Space Admiral Meldrum, who had been the first man to set a foot on the Moon some forty years ago.

"Gentlemen; this is Captain William Enright, test pilot of the Interstellar Spacecraft One, Operation Interstellar. Captain Enright, the Board of Inquiry." The admiral named them around the table. The only one Billy knew was Commodore Hogan;

the rest he only recognized by name, other than the top brass of his own project. He nodded affably, then Billy frowned and asked:

"This looks formidably formal, sir. Am I to be represented by someone appointed in my favor?"

Admiral Meldrum shook his head. "This is no Court Military," he said. "This is a Court of Inquiry. You would have faced this court if you had returned home on schedule, to deliver your report. There have been no charges made formally. If your explanation is adequate, there will be none. This meeting will be informal. If you can show just cause for returning eighteen months late from a twelve-hour mission, no charges will be made. Now, Captain Enright, please deliver your report, beginning at the beginning?"

"Certainly. At 1200 hours, on 4 March 2014, I took off from the Earth in the first spacecraft capable of driving faster than the velocity of light. I—"

"One moment, Captain," asked one of the men in civilian dress. Enright blinked and saw that the man's name was Harness. E. D. Harness, Senator, Chairman of the Committee on Special Affairs and so forth. Enright nodded, and the senator went on: "My scientific knowledge is

sketchy. I was taught that nothing can exceed the speed of light."

"You were taught prior to Bergenholm's discovery of the nullification of mass," smiled Enright. "Mass increases, in accordance with Einstein's equations, as the velocity approaches the speed of light, so that the mass becomes infinite when the velocity of light is reached. But when mass is nullified, or reduced to zero—" Billy Enright spread his hands amusedly, "—you can multiply it all night and a hundred billion times zero is still zero."

"And the drive?"

"A standard reaction motor of the rocket type. Since the ship's mass is zero, its inertia is also zero and therefore the thrusting force of an infant can move zero mass and inertia if need be."

Senator Harness nodded. "Then with any kind of reaction thrust you could achieve infinite velocity because the mass and inertia are zero?"

"If we were passing through a completely unresisting medium, what you say would be true. But even the deepest part of interstellar space still contains a good many atoms per cubic centimeter. We found this almost-perfect vacuum a resisting medium to a spacecraft going faster than light."

"And so what was your estimated velocity?"

"About sixty-three light years per hour," replied Billy Enright.

The senator nodded as though he were satisfied, but he asked one more question: "Captain Enright, do you know the main purpose of your mission?"

"Certainly. Until the discovery of the faster than light drive, mankind was forever trapped on the Earth. One by one we have landed on the several planets and their satellites only to find them hopelessly airless, poisonous of atmosphere, utterly cold and inhospitable, or deadly to human life in other ways. The explosive increase of Earth's population made it necessary to find another frontier, another hope for colonization and expansion. The massless space drive offered this hope to us. My mission was to test the drive, to test the crossing of interstellar space, and if at all possible return with some tale of hope."

Commodore Hogan grunted. "Must have been some sweet paradise you found, Captain Enright."

Admiral Meldrum rapped the gavel on the table. "Please. No personalities, Commodore. Why do you take that sarcastic tone?"

Captain Enright may have good reason for his delay, you know."

The commodore grunted again. "The I. S.-1 was stocked with only enough food, water, and air for a trip of ten days' duration. I ask you all, how did Captain Enright sustain himself for an eighteen-month jaunt? Unless, of course, he landed and made himself at home for a year and a half. Or, he may be able to explain all about subjective and objective time!" he snapped, whirling back to face Billy Enright.

The young spaceman shrugged. "No," he said. "The Einstein Equation of time versus velocity is also obviated when mass is reduced to zero. No, Commander Hogan, I did not get involved with this at all."

"You made no stop for repairs, no delay because of technical difficulties?"

"No."

"Captain Enright, please outline your orders carefully."

Billy Enright cleared his throat and took a sip of water. "At 1200 hours I was to take off, heading for a small, insignificant Type G-Zero dwarf in Hercules, the exact coordinates I've forgotten for the moment. This star was selected over the more familiar celestial objects because it was closest to the Sun in size and radiation, and therefore

many believed that it was most likely to have a set of planets similar to the planets of Sol. I was to test the drive and make observations on the process of exceeding the velocity of light, recording them. I was to approach this star—"

"Sixty light years distant?" interrupted Commodore Hogan.

"Yes."

"An hour's trip each way," said the commodore pointedly.

"—I was to ascertain if this star had any planets, and if so, whether there was one at about ninety million miles from the luminary. If this was so, I was to approach and attempt to land. Then contingent upon the success of the previous set of 'ifs' I was to tackle the following. I was to take samples of the air and the water and the ground. I was to measure the temperature. I was to dig up a plant or two and I was to see if I could catch a small animal alive. I was to remain on that hypothetical planet for no longer than six hours. Then I was to take off and return to Earth."

"I see. And in the case of emergency, either there or en route?"

"I was to turn immediately and return to Earth."

"And you did not."

"Commodore, may I point out

that mine was a mission of rather extraordinary nature? I was a volunteer. Willingly I put myself in a position that no other man had ever been in before. I went into the Deep Unknown, across the limitless depths of galactic space, and my return was subject to considerable doubt. Now, the fact that I have returned at all is in itself a statement of success, even though I may have been delayed."

"I am sorry, Captain Enright. But your statements have not yet given us one reason for your delay. In fact, everything you have said indicates that you could, at any time in the past eighteen months, have returned. Instead, you seem to have deliberately remained out of touch with the people who entrusted you to perform a difficult mission."

Billy Enright drawled, "Well, not exactly, Commodore. I did send an explanatory message, but that was in deep space and I am afraid that the radio waves will not reach the Earth for about fifteen years more."

Commodore Hogan faced Admiral Meldrum. "I consider this to be rank insolence and insubordination. This man was entrusted with a billion-dollar spacecraft, the first and so far the only one of its kind. It took five years of hard work to build

it and another three years to fit it out for its maiden trip. This Captain Enright went out with the hopes and prayers of all mankind, but instead of following orders he apparently went galivanting all over the galaxy. I presume that his idea was that his very return would cause us to forget his absence for a year and a half. I—" Commodore Hogan whirled and faced Billy Enright. "Captain," he asked acidly, "did you take off as ordered?"

"I did."

"And you did go into deep space on course?"

"I did."

"And you approached this star, found this hoped-for planet, landed, and—er—then was captured by some tribe of savages who kept you prisoner?"

"Hardly. I did not reach my destination star and so I still do not know whether it has any planets."

"You were unavoidably detained?"

"You can put it that way."

"Suppose you tell us in what manner, before I ask that a formal charge of absent without official leave be logged against you."

Captain Enright nodded. "I took off under normal rocket take-off procedure, dropping my first stage after nine minutes. At the start of the second stage,

the mass-nullifying field was turned on, which brought my velocity up to the estimated constant velocity of sixty-three light years per hour. Once my velocity reached its constant, I turned off the reaction motor to conserve fuel for my return, leaving only the tiniest trickle of power running from an auxiliary rocket to maintain speed. I made observations and recorded them as directed.

"Then," said Billy Enright, "when I was out about fifteen minutes, I caught sight of a teardrop shaped spacecraft closing in from one side and catching up from behind. It was painted in bright enamel in panels. From the pointed tail there came a faint halo of pale blue light. It caught up with me as though I were standing still, and as it came alongside, a bright green searchlight stabbed out and swept along my hull, stopping near my astrodome.

"Then to my complete shock and dismay I heard a gruff voice snap: 'Pull 'er over to one side, Buster!'

"Wondering what to do, and how he could talk to me, I blubbered, 'Huh?'

"He said, 'Just pull her over and don't give me that *huh* stuff.'

"I told him, 'But we're in free flight. I can't.'

"At this point he swore in an unintelligible voice and the green searchlight turned to bright red. It must have been a tractor beam because he started hauling and I could see the stars spinning and I could feel a definite deceleration forward that almost pulled me out of the astrodome and into space itself. Then there was a metallic clink and in another half minute a tall man in polished leather came in and waved me back to the pilot's chair.

"'Realize you were doing sixty?'

"'Sixty?'

"'Sixty light years per hour in a forty light zone. Let's see your license!'

"'License?' I asked blankly.

"He pulled out a pad and started to scribble. 'Sixty lights in a forty light zone and driving without a license. Boy, oh boy! Say! What kind of a crate is this anyway?'

"'It's a standard reaction drive with mass nullifiers.'

"His eyes gleamed brighter. 'You know that free flight is just plain coasting?'

"'Of course,' I said angrily.

"'Spacecraft running out of control,' he said, scribbling some more.

"'But you can't do this to me,' I cried.

"The gleam in his eyes grew hard and scornful. 'Suppose you're the best pal of the Sector Senator, play knolla with the Commissioner of Spacelanes, and will get me patrolling a beat along the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, huh?' He looked down at his pad and grunted again. 'Better come with me,' he said sourly. 'We couldn't accept your bail, with no known address and not wearing a license. Boy, you've had it!'"

Captain Billy Enright took a deep breath and grinned. "No, gentlemen, my delay was legal, not technical. They slipped me eighteen months, by the time they'd finished adding up the charges. I was not gallivanting, I was doing time at what they please to call 'Educational Labor.'" "

Everybody looked a bit slack-jawed. Commodore Hogan leaped in front of Billy Enright and waved a finger under his nose.

"Of all of the incredibly fantastic—" his voice failed. He took charge of himself. "You sent a radio message?" he asked calmly.

"Yes. The whole thing is coming in via radio."

"And you expect us to swallow

this bucket of foul fish unsupported for the next fifteen years? I suggest that you spend the intervening time in jail so we'll know where to send our apologies."

"Won't be necessary," smiled Billy Enright. "I've proof here." He dipped into his hip pocket and took out a small plastic folder. He flipped it open to display an ornate metal shield that glowed with some inner light completely beyond Earth science. He showed it around the conference table and then said, "Gentlemen, what they call 'Educational Labor' means just that. Due to my incarceration for eighteen months, I have qualified for the position of Sector Patrolman. And so help me, the first man that tries deep space without qualifying for a license gets heaved into the clink. And whether or not this Human Race is going to be permitted to colonize our nearer stars depends only upon how fast we cotton to the idea of becoming a junior member of the Galactic Council."

"Good day, gentlemen."

Sector Patrolman Billy Enright walked out of the Board amid a stunned silence. Home had never looked so good.

Pemie

BY MILTON LESSER

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

Burt was tired of taking his family out to the asteroids for a picnic every week-end. But with a wife and two spoiled brats to good him into the regular routine, what could a man do? Only, as it turned out, this particular picnic wasn't quite regular routine!

Burt reached out for the stud that would fire the fore-rockets, but a small white hand already rested on the button.

"Let me, Daddy. You promised —"

When he wanted something, Johnny's voice took on that wailing quality. He wanted something now; Burt had promised him that he could land the ship.

"Okay," Burt said. "Press it —now. Now!"

Johnny took his hand off the

stud. "Don't holler at *mé*," he told his father severely.

Burt swore under his breath and jammed down on the stud. A red light overhead winked on and off furiously, and he knew that if he had waited another moment they would have plowed into the asteriod like a battering ram into a tub of soft butter.

"Marcia, oh Marcia!" he turned and called over his shoulder to his wife.

She stuck her head in through



•EBERLE

the galley door. "Dear," she said, "let me make these sandwiches, will you? I don't tell you how to pilot the ship, but I'll never get this lunch all packed unless you let me alone."

Burt scowled. "That's the general idea. I want to be let alone, too. So if you'll just take your darling little son the devil out of here—"

"Why, Burt Rogers! Johnny's only eight, and he's quite harmless. If I had known ten years ago that you didn't like children—"

Burt shook his head. "Joan's fine. Joan is two years younger than Johnny, but she doesn't bother anyone. She just sits in the galley and—"

"Hah!" Marcia snorted. "She sits in the galley and digs her arms into the mayonnaise tub up to the elbows, that's all."

"Well, then they're both brats."

"Burt!"

"They are, and it's your fault, Marcia. You always say let the children express themselves, we can't frustrate them or cut them short in any way—so look what happens."

"You look what happens," Marcia declared dramatically. "If we don't pull out of the dive in a couple of seconds, we'll splatter all over that planetoid."

"Let me land it, let me land

it!" wailed Johnny.

Burt spun to the controls, and his fingers flicked rapidly over the buttons. He was sweating when he brought the ship down with a none-too-gentle dump. He heard Joan's whimper from inside the galley, and Marcia began to tell him what a lousy pilot he was. Johnny was playing cops and robbers with the topography through the foreport.

"This," Burt said, "is the last weekend picnic for me. Definitely the last."

Marcia opened her mouth to say something, but Burt cut her off. "I don't want to hear any more about it. You'll just have to find another way for the kids to express themselves . . ."

They usually found an asteroid with a weird terrain, and just looking at it through the portable bubble-sphere kept the kids pretty busy. This time, however, things were different. The asteroid was only twenty miles in diameter, yet it had an atmosphere of oxygen and inert gases, and it was comfortably warm. No bubble-sphere this time to keep the kids hemmed in—and Johnny and Joan would be roving all over the uncharted surface.

Burt shuddered. What a job he'd have today. But then, this was the last time: they could

talk themselves blue in the face and plead, but this was the last time . . . And maybe there'd be life, since there was air and warmth. But that was silly: a body this size would not have life, and even if Johnny took advantage of the low gravity and jumped thirty feet in the air, he wouldn't get hurt—he'd float down gently as a feather.

Marcia pouted as she spread the table-cloth out on a flat expanse of rock. Burt put his hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away from him. "Brats, eh?" she muttered.

"Well, maybe I didn't mean it that way. But you just name me another father at Marsport who takes his family up in a spaceship every Sunday to go picnicking. And a different asteroid each week. Ed Jones sits on his fanny all weekend, and Tom Ferris spends Saturday night in the gambling joints so he's dead on his feet Sunday and can hardly stay awake during the church services."

Marcia took his hand and placed it back on her shoulder. "Okay, dear—you're wonderful. But that doesn't give you permission to call my children 'brats'."

Burt smiled. "My children, too. And, well—if they're not brats, we've certainly spoiled them . . ."

Johnny's voice cut through

the thin air. "Pop. Hey, pop. C'mere!"

Burt got up, laughing. "So that's how you teach your kids to call their old man, eh?"

Burt walked toward the incredibly close horizon. You could see the curvature of the tiny planet quite distinctly, and in a tight circle all around them the pale blue sky came down and met the jumble of rocks and crystal which was the surface of the asteroid. Johnny had called from someplace beyond the horizon, and as he walked, Burt heard him again: "You deaf, pop? C'mere!"

Johnny was standing, little hands on little hips, near a mound of dull metal. No, it wasn't a mound—it was battered and twisted and rusted, but the tear-drop shape was unmistakable. A spaceship . . .

Burt found the ancient airlock and pushed through the rusted door. He looked at the control panel. "It's an old Havelock," he muttered. "I'll be damned. They haven't made these in twenty years."

He went outside again, where Johnny still stood.

"Pretty nifty, eh pop?" the boy said.

Burt called: "Marcia. Hey, Marcia. C'mere!"

Leading Joan by her hand, Marcia reached them in a few minutes. "Don't wonder why Johnny called you like that, Burt Rogers. Just don't you wonder at all. He's a chip off the old block, that's what he is."

Joan said, "Mama, what's a chip off the old block?"

"Later, dear, later. What's on your mind, Burt?"

He gestured. "This—"

Marcia stared. "Why, it's—it's a spaceship!"

"It is," Johnny nodded. "An old Havelock Cruiser. And I found it."

"But these people must have crashed here years ago."

"Yeah. Look, Marcia, you better take the kids away while I look for the remains. Got to find them and report to the police at Marsport when we get back, but there's no reason why the kids have to see."

Marcia took Johnny's hand in one of her own and Joan's in the other, and she walked away with them beyond the close horizon. "Okay, Burt," she called back. "You can start looking."

Burt did not like the task ahead of him, but with general space travel still less than half a century old, lost ships were no rarity, and he considered himself morally obligated to find the bodies. He was back in the Have-

lock now, and it was a small ship. He covered it in five minutes, and he scratched his head. No one . . . there were all the signs of occupation, but no one was around. Dishes for three were set on the plastalloy table, with a blubbery green mass on each plate, billowing over on to the table. That meant that there had been food on those dishes when, quite suddenly, the three people had disappeared. It also meant that bacteria, at least, flourished on this asteroid. And—what else? Why had the three people disappeared, why had they vanished utterly with a meal waiting for them on the table—

"Burt! Burt!" It was Marcia, and she was screaming.

Burt poked his head outside the broken airlock. Marcia was running toward the Havelock. "Burt—get out. To me, quick!"

Burt looked up. Toward the other horizon was a slight hill, not a very high one, but enough for Marcia to have seen it from beyond the horizon. And rolling down that hill now, gathering speed as it came, was a massive boulder.

Heading straight for the Havelock—

Burt scrambled up out of the airlock, cursing when his trousers caught on an edge of rusted metal. He tugged at them and

heard them rip. Then he was clear and running toward Marcia.

With a great grinding crashing sound the rock plowed into the Havelock, smashing it and crushing the half-corroded metal flat. Burt looked back at a big cloud of dust, and when it cleared, the Havelock looked like so much scrap. If he had been inside he would have been crushed to a pulp. Less than a pulp, they never would have found him.

"Burt! Burt—" Marcia was sobbing against his chest. "Of all the freak accidents—"

"Uh-uh." He shook his head as they walked back to the broken remains of the Havelock. "That was no accident."

He pointed to the little hill. "That hasn't got a slope of more than ten degrees, honey. It couldn't have been an accident. The rock never could have gathered so much momentum on that hill."

"Not an accident?"

"No. Someone — something — pushed that rock."

The boulder was unmoving now, fifty yards from the scrap heap which had been the Havelock Cruiser.

Marcia said, "Someone pushed *that*? It's as big as the ship, Burt. It weighs five tons if it weighs an ounce. Maybe in this slight gravity—"

Burt shook his head. "Even

that wouldn't account for it. That rock was pushed."

Marcia clung to him, shuddering. "Burt, let's get the children and leave this place!"

He nodded, and he was about to call Johnny, when something bounded high into the air over the horizon, then floated down, gently. "Johnny!" Marcia cried.

"He's detached his equalizer," Burt said. "That crazy kid—"

Each of them had one of the little gravity equalizers at his belt. It was a clever invention: you wore it in space flight, and you never became weightless as space-travelers did in the old days. And you wore it on any planet, creating earth-norm gravity. Now Johnny had detached his, and he weighed no more than a couple of pounds here on the tiny asteroid.

Something else bounded high into the air, came floating down. Johnny called: "Lookit us. We're birds, that's what we are. We're birds!"

Burt knew that Johnny had removed Joan's equalizer as well. Two forms came bouncing toward them over the wild terrain, "Just press the button to the left," Burt pleaded. "Press it to the left like a good boy, Johnny. You do it and we'll give you a present."

"Naa. This is fun. You try and get me."

But Joan was crying, and she did not know what to do. Every time she landed, she tried to take a step forward and she soared high into the air again. Closer bounded the two figures, and Johnny soared right by, almost near enough to touch. Burt dove for him, and came up clutching air. Johnny bounded away again, and, calling threats and taunts behind him, he disappeared over the hill, in the direction from which the boulder had come.

Marcia had been luckier. She held Joan by one arm now, readjusting the equalizer with her free hand. Joan sat down, crying. "I have Joan," Marcia told her husband. "You go and get Johnny, Burt. Get him—quick. I don't like this place."

Burt didn't like it, either. *Something had pushed that rock,*

Marcia screamed. "Burt — look."

The rocks and rubble near the remains of the Havelock were rumbling and grinding. Burt heard a great cracking sound, like a huge dead branch breaking. The ground near the Havelock trembled and the shock of it reached them. Burt sat down hard, and he saw Joan and Marcia fall in a heap.

He tried to get up, but he couldn't; the ground was still trembling. A crack appeared near the Havelock, and it crawled

along the ground slowly, crookedly. It crawled at a snail's pace, less than a snail's pace—but it moved. And it grew. It was as wide as Burt's arm. Wider. It grew.

Suddenly, it gaped wide, and the grinding and rumbling was louder. It opened into a cavernous maw—right under the Havelock. For a moment the Havelock stood poised, as if on air—and then the battered, flattened ship disappeared within the hole, clattering against the walls as it fell.

The ground shuddered again, violently; the hole became a crack, closing in upon itself. It disappeared altogether, and only the rough terrain remained.

But the Havelock was gone.

Marcia stood up. "An earthquake?" She trembled.

"On a planetoid twenty miles in diameter? Don't be silly. You'd need an unstable interior for an earthquake—and this little globe cooled and stabilized long ago."

"Yes? Then why is it warm?"

She had him there, and Burt didn't know. Why was the asteroid warm? If he knew the answer to that, he might know the answer to a lot of things.

"This is stupid, Burt. Let's stop talking and find Johnny. He could be half way around the asteroid by now, or more."

Burt shook his head. "We can't all go and look. Joan would delay us. You stay here with her, Marcia—or, better still, get back to the ship with her and stay inside. I'll find Johnny and bring him back. Then we'll get the devil out of here."

Marcia smiled wanly. "That I'd like. And Burt?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Be careful . . ."

Burt felt like a kangaroo. Only no earthly kangaroo had ever taken leaps like this. He had flicked the switch of the gravity equalizer over to the right, shutting off the power. Then he had taken off in great leaps, looking for Johnny. His jumps carried him forty or fifty feet in the air, and then he floated down, almost weightless.

With concentration, he could have avoided those high leaps. He could have propelled himself forward, fifty and sixty feet at a jump, but he did not want to. The horizon was too close, and the only way he could find Johnny was like this. As he reached the apex of each leap, he could see much further than he could on the ground, and he was looking for the boy.

Once he thought he saw Johnny, a tiny blob way off in the distance, but he came down from his jump too soon, and he could

not be sure. He called loudly, and everything else was quiet, and his voice was almost frightening. Soon the ground felt spongy to him, but he shrugged it off. As soon as he landed, he was off again, and it probably was his imagination. Hard rock did not become spongy like this, not suddenly, without warning, with no possible explanation.

But once he landed hard, and he rested a moment, panting. He moved his feet and they slopped about, like on a muddy field. He reached down carefully. One wrong move would upset his equilibrium and he'd go shooting off into the air. He touched the ground, and it was wet. He pushed, and he felt his hand sinking in, slowly. Fascinated, he pushed again. His hand disappeared to the wrist.

Something was trying to suck him down further, and he tugged. He pulled his hand out with a loud slopping sound, and instinctively he jumped away. He soared into the air again, and when he came down, it was only for a moment—just long enough to leap.

The ground was spongy. And when he was standing there, with his hand immersed to the wrist, the soft spongy stuff had been pulsing, throbbing.

Almost as if it were alive . . .

His mind did not tackle the

problem further. Ahead he saw Johnny—now it was more than his imagination; Johnny was there, leaping into the air ahead of him.

Burt reached the apex of his flight, cupped his hands and yelled through them:

"Johnny! Johnny!"

"Hi, pop!"

The voice came back faintly, playfully.

"Johnny, when you touch ground next time, turn that switch to the left."

"Naa—I'm having fun."

"When I get you, Johnny . . ."

"Aw, okay. Kill joy. What a worry wart."

Apparently, Johnny had turned on his equalizer. Burt saw him on the ground, waiting, and three big leaps brought him there.

Now Johnny was crying.

"What the devil are you crying for? You've jumped around enough—"

"Pop, please. I'm sorry. Get me outa here!"

Johnny was stuck. He was in the spongy ground, up to his ankles. The stuff sucked around his shins, drawing him down further every second, like quicksand. Burt could feel it pulsing as he landed, but it did not suck him in. With the equalizer off, he weighed much less than Johnny did, and now he was tugging

at the boy, pulling at his shoulders, grabbing him under the armpits and tugging, tugging . . .

Johnny came loose suddenly, and Burt soared with him several feet into the air. On the way up, he switched the boy's equalizer off again, and Johnny said:

"You just told me not to, now you do it yourself. What a pop."

Johnny was spoiled and Johnny was precocious, but Burt thought of neither now. Johnny was nothing more than a little bundle which he had to get back to the spaceship. And then they had to leave, all four of them.

The spaceship . . . Marcia did not know how to pilot it, she couldn't lift it off the ground. And the sucking, spongy stuff might engulf the ship, take it down into some unknown womb of the world. They'd be marooned. Marcia and Joan—

All of them.

The trip back was a wild one. Burt tucked his son under one arm and leaped. He kept low to the ground this time, skimming its surface, sometimes leaping as much as seventy feet with one bounding stride. With each stride, the ground became more spongy, and Burt realized with a sinking heart that the surface could never hold the spaceship up. It would be the same as if it had plunged through the gaping maw in the hard rock with the

Havelock—either way it would be gone.

Johnny liked the ride. Every time they landed, he would say, "Again, pop. Again!" And wordless, Burt would leap once more.

Once he jumped high and he thought he saw the spaceship gleaming in the rays of the sun. But that was impossible. It would surely sink.

And then he came down and he did see it. It was there, on a hard expanse of flat rock, where he had left it. Here the ground seemed normal—

He heard Marcia's scream before he saw her. Then she came around the hull of the spaceship, dragging Joan. Screaming again, she fell flat.

Something whizzed by her head, and even from this distance Burt could see that it was a rock the size of a watermelon. She got up again, and she ran forward, but then a whole shower of rocks came after her, smaller this time, two handfuls of egg-sized rocks, thrown by an invisible giant.

He had to be invisible—Burt could see no one. Yet the rocks were being thrown, somehow. Or—the thought suddenly occurred to Burt—they were throwing themselves. The rocks moved under their own power. It was a wild thought and a crazy one, but it made sense. Every other

part of the planetoid was soft and spongy. But here—near the ship—the surface was still hard. And rocks were being thrown. Burt could tell this had been happening for a long time, because the hull of the ship was scarred from the fusilade.

It was unreasonable to suppose that this tiny area, alone of the entire sphere, could not become spongy. Then there was a reason why it remained hard—and where there was reason there was sentience. And further, why hadn't a big stone been thrown, one large enough to crush their Pacemaker as the Havelock had been crushed? There certainly were enough stones around—

Everything indicated a *game*. Something was playing with them. They were easy prey, they were dead ducks—but something was having fun with them first. They were goners, they didn't have a chance, and that something needed the activity and the recreation. It was a sadistic game. Back on earth, some of the kids had stripped the wings off flies, made them hop about dizzily, helplessly, until they tired of the sport. And then they had crushed them . . .

The planetoid was playing with them!

Burt called: "Get inside the ship, Marcia! Inside!"

"I can't. If I stand still long

enough to manipulate the lock, these stones will get me, Burt—"

"I'm coming!"

He switched on his equalizer and Johnny's, and still holding the boy under one arm, he plunged across the rock. Something reached up and tripped him, and he sprawled out flat. He had fallen over a small outcropping of rock—where no outcropping had been before.

He got up, and then he reached the Pacemaker. He pushed Johnny in front of him, and the boy stood with his sister. Marcia looked up:

"How are we going to get inside, Burt?"

"You just open the lock. Come on, now."

She turned her back and went to work on the dials. Burt stood there, waiting for the stones that would come, hunching himself over, trying to cover the three of them—

No stones came.

Instead, he heard an ominous cracking sound, a rumbling . . .

Off where the spongy ground joined the hard rock a crack appeared. It was small, but it grew. And it moved. It snaked along the ground, slowly, twisting, heading for the ship. Now it was half as wide as Johnny's body, and now it was wider.

Burt pushed Marcia away and attacked the lock with clumsy

fingers. His hand trembled, but Marcia huddled against the side of the hull, sobbing, and he knew she could not have handled the dials in time.

Three around and then four over: damn it, there's the blue light, but he still needed the white and red. Five around and one over—ah, the white! Two around and six over—red, white, and blue!

He pushed Johnny and Joan in front of him, then he grabbed Marcia around the waist and hurled her inside. The crack was half as wide as the Pacemaker now, rumbling, churning—and growing.

He ran to the controls and he kicked the engine over. He felt the ship poise on the brink, as he had seen the Havelock do before it had plunged within a similar hole. He felt the ship totter, and then he fired the studs for all the aft rockets at once. The ship roared once and he was shoved back hard in his seat. Then they hurtled furiously skyward.

Below them now, the planetoid was a writhing, twisting mass, shooting pulpy tentacles miles into space, groping for them, seeking. But they were out of reach. Burt circled a few times, watching the stone globe which now was a living entity.

Behind him, Marcia watched too. "It's—alive," she said.

"Yes. Sleeping when we arrived, but it's alive now. Twenty years ago it ate the people of that Havelock, and then it became sluggish. Evidently it does not need much food, for all its vast bulk. It became sluggish and it slept, and when we landed we stirred it and it finished the job on that Havelock. Then it wanted us . . ."

"But *alive*?"

"Why not?" Burt said. "Part plant, part animal, it's warm with its own life. It breathes slowly, holding the thin atmosphere to its body, growing plants for photosynthesis when it needs oxygen, a perfectly coordinated being."

"So big, Burt. It's so big."

"Sure. On Mars the native life is bigger than on earth. Why?"

"Why? I don't know."

"Because Mars has a weaker gravity pull, being smaller than the earth. And here, out in space, there is no gravity to keep life down. A plant grows and grows as long as it lives, unlike an animal. This huge asteroid has been growing for ages, millions of years, maybe. What's to stop it? No gravity pressing down. Perhaps it can live purely on the mineral matter of the meteors which fall. Maybe it's only a

seed, with food-matter stored up inside. Who knows?"

Johnny and Joan came out from the galley. Joan said:

"Mama, I'm hungry."

Marcia laughed. "We never did have that picnic, Burt."

"Uh-huh. You're right—so we didn't. But this damn asteroid almost did—on us."

"Papa," Johnny said, "let's land someplace and have a picnic."

"Go to hell," Burt said, forgetting he was speaking to a boy, his boy.

"Burt! Then you wonder why Johnny curses. Just watch your language in front of the children, Burt Rogers!"

"Okay," he said. "But no more picnics. I'm going to report this thing to the police, and they'll blow it out of the sky with atomite. Then we'll have a nice meal at home. But no more picnics, ever. I'll take the kids to the Canalport swimming pool on week ends—half-way around the planet. But no more picnics."

"Please, papa," Johnny said.

Marcia nodded. "Look. He's being polite."

Burt sighed. He knew he could get away with it this week-end. But later on in the month—or certainly next month—there would be more picnics.

THE TEMPLE OF EARTH

BY POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

All his life, Rikard had defied the warlords of Coper City, but even the stoutest outlaw could be outnumbered. Now Rayth offered him freedom for the death of the Chief Engineer. It seemed simple enough—until Rikard began to learn the History of Earth!

"Here they come!"

Leda's voice vibrated in the ears of the four men with her. They stood with their helmets touching so they could talk, eyes looking down the rugged sweep of Copernicus to the force which came running upward against them. At their backs, the brutal heights of rock climbed for the stars, but they stood in a recess between looming crags, as good a defensive position as they could hope for.

"Eight, nine—" Rikard strained his eyes through the queer tricky light and shadow—the

brilliant rushing blue of Earth nearly in full phase, the utter dark of knife-edged umbras, a sprawling savage confusion of spires and cliffs tumbling down toward the far ghostly shimmer of the plain. "Ten at least, I make it, probably more. It'll be a rough fight."

The tiny metal-glinting specks bounded closer, twenty-foot leaps from height to height, and now they could see the sheen of Earthglow on spears and axes. Rikard said slowly: "It will most likely be death if we make a stand. Let anyone who wishes go



down to them now, and I will not think the less of him."

"Down to execution or enslavement? You should know us better than that," said Huw. He hefted his own ax, and shadows crept over the folds of his flexicord suit. "Heh, they'll have to come at us only a few at a time. We'll mince 'em as they do."

A mutter of assent rumbled from Jonak and Chungti. Leda remained silent, but one gauntleted hand closed on Rikard's arm.

The outlaw chief's gaunt dark face flashed in a brief grin. "Thank you," he said. "We'll at least show the damned Copers that Nyrac can still fight."

He moved away from the group and strung his bow. It was a big one, suitable for the giant who wielded it, and had been in his family for a long time. Plastic bow, wire string, steel arrows that leaped out with a hundred pounds of force behind them—such a weapon could pierce a spacesuit and come out the other side in a rush of air. Wood and cord were of little use on the surface; they dried and cracked in the sucking vacuum, sizzled by day and froze by night. But with this weapon he had sent more men than he remembered to Earth.

Standing in the abysmal shadow of a crag, he nocked an

arrow and took aim. The bow thrummed in his hand and a bright shaft sprang forth. One of the attacking band suddenly leaped up, fell, and rolled down the long slope with the moisture-laden air gushing out like his fleeing soul.

"There's one less!" cried Leda savagely, and raised her pike. None heard her speak in the looming silence, but they saw her lips laughing behind the plastic helmet. Rikard turned for a glimpse of her, the strong fair face, the heavy yellow hair—turned blue and green now by the pouring Earthlight, but not the less good to look on.

He had stolen her three years before, in a raid on Moonburg, and she had fought him bitterly for awhile. But later there had been understanding between them, and when the Copers overran Nyrac and he and a few men fled into rebellious exile, she was the only one of his wives who had come with him. They smiled briefly at each other and then he faced back toward the enemy.

His bow throbbed again, and he cursed as the shaft whipped past a nearing figure. The man hurled a spear; it bounced off the crag and Huw stepped forth to seize and throw it back. Rikard fired once more, and another warrior tumbled to the stony ground, to freeze in death.

Now they were close, terribly close, a good dozen of them rushing in on him. He sent a final snapped shot against them, dropped the bow, and grabbed up his ax. Swiftly the outlaws fell into a defending line: Rikard, Huw, and Jonak, the heaviest, standing shoulder to shoulder between the two great pillars; Leda and Chungti just behind them with pikes at the ready.

The first of the Copers hit Rikard with the furious velocity of a broad jump, ax swinging down against the chief's helmet. Rikard caught the blow on his own weapon's handle, twisted it down, and kicked the attacker in the belly. He bounced away, wide open for assault, but it wouldn't do to leave the line. The next was almost instantly on the outlaw, blade cleaving vacuum. Rikard's ax blurred down and crashed into the space helmet. The shock of the blow rammed home in his own muscles, but it had burst open the tough plastic. Air whirled out, white with frost, red with the blood that suddenly foamed from mouth and nose.

The enemy's own ax had dropped from his fingers as Rikard's blade smashed home, and clanged off the chief's helmet. Rikard smote at the warrior beyond, hit a metal shoulder plate, and dodged a counterblow. Leda

thrust between him and Jonak, driving the pike home with a terrible force that split the Coper's suit at the belly. He lurched back, clutching futile hands against the streaming air, his face distorted with unheard screams.

Two of them were on Rikard now, ax and spear, blows clattering off his helmet and shoulder plates as he dodged and parried and hewed. He whirled his weapon over his head, brought it crashing down to break another helmet and the skull beneath, and his own yelling rang in his ears.

From the corner of one eye he saw Jonak fall. Snarling, he swung on the killer, his blow parried by the other axhead. "Go to Mars, you bastard!" he growled, and hailed blow after blow against the enemy's guard, a leaping dancing fury of steel that drove the fellow back until he was against a cliff. Rikard sprang in and slew him.

Panting, he whirled around to see that the Copers had broken his line, that they raged three or four about each of the survivors, thrusting and smiting, a flicker of light and hard metal against the monstrous blacknesses of shadow. Even as he watched, Chungti went down with a spear in him. Huw and Leda stood back to back, beating off the pack that snarled around

them, and Rikard launched himself across the space between to fall on the Copers. He clove one helmet from behind, pitched another man aside, parried a thrust and kicked the thruster back, and joined his comrades.

A cloudiness of freezing moisture fogged his helmet, and Huw toppled against him. He stood over the body and struck home. Leda swept her pike in a wide arc, got it between a man's legs and tripped him, and stabbed him before he could rise. Then a Coper got between her and Rikard, threw his arms around her from behind and dragged her to the ground.

They closed in on Rikard, hemming him in a solid wall of armored bodies, bearing him down and holding him fast with four men on each arm. When they brought forth wire and began lashing his hands together he kicked out, rose to his feet and knocked them away as they came on him, until someone else tackled him and he went down once more.

Captured! By the living Earth, no clean death in battle, but captured!

He lay gasping the hot foul air of his suit, looking up to the crystal dark of heaven, a million needle-sharp stars and the ghostly glory of the Milky Way, up to Earth's huge blue disc, and the

world, the Moon-world of witch-light and shadow and cruel fanged stone, reeled about him with his dismay. Captured!

A tall man, apparently the chief of the band, counted the survivors and then put his helmet against Rikard's. His face was sharply carved, dark-eyed, with the pointed beard of a Coper noble and the hollow cheeks corpse-blue in the light. He said slowly: "Yes, you are the rebel leader. I'm glad we took you alive."

Rikard looked sullenly back at him.

"Behave yourself," advised the other. "Remember we hold the woman too."

They scaled the heights of Copernicus and descended to the plain which the crater ringed in. Not far off was an armored dome with sentries before it, one of the airlocks leading to a tunnel. They entered this and came to the long tube-lit bareness underground. A few Coper soldiers were posted here, taking turns at guard duty on the outside.

Like all their city freemen they wore more clothes than the outlying barbarians, who rarely donned more than a pocketed kilt if that much—these had tunics as well; and flat steel helmets, and carried the swords that

were useful underground though ineffective against a spacesuit; nor did they have the war-paint of barbarian fighters. They did not mock the prisoners—the name of Rikard of Nyrac had been too frightening for the past year—but they leered at Leda.

Even the outlaws were glad to shed their spacesuits. Sweat and the needs of nature made it uncomfortable to be outside more than a few hours at a time. They were stripped, their hands bound behind them, and marched between an alert guard down the tunnel toward Coper City. It went rapidly, the long bounding pace of men in home territory who had no ambush to fear.

Rikard's mind whirled over the catastrophes of the past hours. He and his men—some fifty in all—had been living mostly on the outside since the fall of Nyrac a year ago. They had had seal tents which they moved from place to place, and had descended into the tunnels and cities often through old unguarded airlocks to raid for food, water, air, and the killing of Coper men. While they fought, they had been a symbol of resistance to the free people within and beyond the expanding Coper empire, they had checked its advance a little, they had been a rallying force and many young men had come to

join them. There had been hope.

Then—Rikard and his four companions returned from a scouting trip to find their camp in the hands of the enemy. They had fought clear, had been pursued, and finally this squad had hunted them down and captured the two rebel leaders—and that was all there was to it. That was the end—the end of the fight, the end of hope, the end most likely of life.

His bitter dark eyes turned on the leader of the squad. That one had donned a tunic of brilliant colors, the dress of a mighty noble, and the sword at his waist was jeweled. "Who are you?" he asked coldly.

The lean face smiled. "I am Rayth, prince of Coper City," he answered. "It was—fortunate for both of us—that I should have happened to lead the group that found you. Others would have had you killed out of hand, but I can find better uses for you." He nodded at Leda. "Yes indeed."

Her head lifted haughtily, shining raw gold of hair spilling over broad shoulders to her supple waist. Rikard snarled and wrenched at his bonds. They dug harshly into his wrists, and a guard pricked him with a spear.

Rayth held Rikard's bow between his hands. "This is an unusually fine weapon," he said. "I hadn't thought the barbar-

ians had anything so good. You may get it back, but you'll have to earn it."

The tunnel opened into a great cavern, a reaching vastness whose farther walls could not be seen. It was farmland, peasants going between the long rows of tanks and tending a riotous greenery of food plants, an occasional hard-faced overseer pausing in his rounds to salute the prince. They went by a stockyard, cattle, pigs, sheep, and poultry in their pens, slaves cleaning and feeding. Not far off was a slaughterhouse, and Rayth's aristocratic nose crinkled.

A winding ramp led up through other levels. They passed the drab, huddled compartments of the lower classes, gray-clad peasants crowded with their families into doorless rooms. Above that was a factory level, where acolyte engineers labored over weapons and tools, over ore-smelting and refining, and other workmen turned out clothes and food and the remaining necessities of life. The party stopped here to deliver the battle-torn spacesuits for repair. Flexicord would be mended, plastic melted together again; nobody cared about the stripped bodies withering on the outside.

Rikard could not forbear to

ask: "Where is your air factory?"

"That is farther up, in the Temple and in direct charge of the Chief Engineer," said Rayth politely. "It is, after all, among the most vital jobs." He raised his eyebrows. "You didn't have an air plant at Nyrac, did you?"

"No. We bought or took it from elsewhere as needed."

"Ah, I thought so. Most of the barbarians do. Now, Rikard, you are a man of intelligence, and I ask you to think a bit. We must have extra air, to replace that which is lost one way or another, but it takes skill and some equipment to get it from the minerals in which it is locked. Rather than war on us, one of the few places where they can produce it, would it not have been wiser to accept us in friendship and receive from us a steady and dependable supply?"

"We were freemen. Now we are slaves, and must grovel to your overlords and give them all we make in exchange for a miserly ration. That is reason enough to fight you."

"I don't think," said Rayth sardonically, "that your own slaves notice any change."

Rikard clamped his lips tight.

Above the factory level was a park. It was known that the life of the air, and hence of man, depended on green plants, so even

the smallest village had its farms and even the outlaws' crowded seal-tents had contained some pots of vegetation. But Rikard and Leda had never seen anything like this riot of blooms and rearing trees, had never felt grass soft and cool beneath their bare feet, and the girl drew a gasp of wonder and buried her face in a huge sweet cluster of roses.

Rayth drew his sword and cut the flowers and handed them to her with a bow. "No fairer than you," he smiled.

She cursed and threw them at his feet.

There were folk of noble class around, warriors, administrators, ranking Engineers, and their children and colorfully gowned women. They gathered about, laughing, shouting, cheering, and Rayth nodded affably but led the way onward.

Above the park were the levels of the spacious upper-class apartments, where others of gentle birth went about in litters and slaves scurried humbly on their errands. Rikard noticed the guardsmen standing rigidly here and there, and decided that the power of the overlords was not so secure as it might look.

On and on, until at last they stood before a high wall ornamented with murals of ancient triumphs and festivals. Four

sentries stood in front of the door, bringing their spears to rigid salute as Rayth approached. A footman opened the door and they were ushered into the prince's home.

It was richly furnished, with hangings and vases and furniture of priceless ancient work—older than the Fall, it must be—as well as the clumsier recent articles of carved wood and hammered metal. Rayth led the way to a spacious chamber whose outer window looked on the sky. Automatically, Rikard stepped over there to make a survey. This place must be high in the dome which rose over the city's underground levels. He could look down the great sweep of metal and concrete to the rugged plain beneath, and out toward the sharply curving horizon and the mighty ringwall which shouldered above it. The stars thronged and blazed in a cold glory of sky.

"Unbind them," said Rayth.

Rikard stretched mightily, rubbing cramped arms. Leda stepped over beside him and her hand stole into his. The guards marched out, except for two who stood alertly against the wall.

"And now what?" asked the barbarian.

"Why, I suppose you will want to clean yourselves. There is a bathroom over that way. After-

ward we will eat, and then we can talk."

There were garments for the prisoners, of a soft colorfulness such as they had not known since the last time Nyrac captured a trading caravan in the tunnels, and there was a feast of skillfully prepared meat and bread, fresh fruit, wine and delicacies for which they had no name. They sat around the table and gorged.

Rayth exerted himself to be pleasant. He brought in slave girls to dance and play, he kept the wine glasses full, and the words that flowed from his smiling lips had nothing to do with immediate reality. Despite himself, Rikard had to listen with interest and reply where he could, and Leda sat enchanted.

The prince got onto ancient history, which seemed to be a pet subject of his. He discoursed of a thousand years of war, politics, conquest and liberation, dynasties and gods and people, and after the vague heroic songs of the barbarians it was a new experience to listen to his crisp cynical prose. They could still read and write in Coper City, though only a few nobles besides the Engineers took the trouble to learn, and so they remembered with precision.

"But the Fall?" whispered

Leda. "What was that?"

"The Fall from Earth?" Rayth smiled and arched his brows. "Well, my fair one, suppose you tell me what you think."

"Why—I never thought much about it," she said, her broad clear forehead wrinkling above the steady blue eyes. "They say that man came from Earth originally, and sinned, and was condemned to dwell in the world here until the sin is redeemed. The souls of the dead return to Earth—"

"Or to Mars, if they are criminals or Copers," grunted Rikard.

Leda threw him a little frown and spread her hands helplessly. "That is all I know."

"Hm—well, it's the general story. Our Engineers tell it to our own commons, since it helps keep them in check. But what would you say if I told you Earth is another world like our own?"

"It couldn't be," said Leda. "The story is that on Earth you can walk on the outside without a spacesuit. And there is green everywhere, and great pools of water, and everyone has enough to eat."

"Oh, yes, beyond doubt Earth is not quite the same as Luna. After all, man and his animals are so ill suited to life here that I think it only reasonable to suppose they came from Earth—not

in any mystic Fall, but by ordinary physical means."

"They jumped?" asked Rikard scornfully.

"No, they—well—I'll come to that later. They had ways. Such few books as have survived tell something about what happened. Men came here from Earth to look for minerals which they needed. Cities were built here and there over the face of Luna, and tunnels cut to connect them and to get at the ores. They were wise, those ancients. They built not only the things we now have and use in a blind fashion, by rote, without much understanding—smelters, sun-power accumulators, spacesuits, and all the rest—but they had other things as well. Weapons more deadly than bow or ax, machines which carried them over the surface and hauled their loads and did the work we must do by hand—but those things have long worn out or been destroyed, and their remnants have been wrecked for the metal in them. We have a few relics in our Temple here, that is all." Rayth's eyes gleamed briefly.

He went on in a moment. "The sin and the Fall were something different from what the Engineers have said in their sermons. I don't know exactly what happened, except that even those wise ancients were not united,

they were divided into—cities, I suppose—and the separate colonies here were owned by these various cities. A war broke out, not a war as we know war but something with doom in it, all the power of the machines turned loose to blast and burn. It must have destroyed civilization on Earth; at least there have been no visitors from there in a thousand years or more. Here on Luna the colonies also fought, but in a more limited way since they had not the greatest engines of destruction. But it was enough to wipe out many cities—you must have seen some of the ruins—and to destroy most of the equipment. Such wise men as survived had not the tools to work with to rebuild all they must have, and the turbulent new generations paid little heed to teachings which had no relation to their own experience. The remaining machines wore out, the wise men died, the cities fought with swords and spears for the necessities of life, and finally the long night of ignorance fell on us. And that is the true story of the Fall."

"How do you know?" challenged Rikard.

"Oh, I have read the remaining old books and fragments of books, and used my own head to piece together what little was known. Coper City has kept

more knowledge than the others anyway. Those went back to naked barbarism, retaining barely enough tradition to survive; but we, living in what had been the most important of the old colonies, kept somewhat more than that. There have always been a few in Coper City who knew the truth, though they lacked means to do anything about it."

Rikard leaned back in his chair and surveyed the prince with arrogant eyes. "All right," he said. "I'll accept it. What's the difference anyway? What do you have us here for and why are you telling us this?"

"Oh—I wanted you to realize that our frank goal of conquering the world is not the unmitigated evil you insist. It will bring knowledge to the barbarians, give them back their heritage, and end their stupid squabbling in a unity of all mankind."

"At the price of making them slaves and paupers!"

"Well, I didn't say we were doing this for our health," said Rayth mildly. "The outlier raids have been more than a little costly and annoying to us, and of course we can always use more workers. However, please don't tell me you are some kind of martyr whose heart bleeds only for your poor oppressed

people. You are angry because your wealth and power were stripped from you. If you could get those back threefold—"

His keen features jutted over the table as he leaned forward. "We will impose the social pattern of Coper City everywhere, yes, because it is our own. But we'll have to take the most able and trustworthy barbarians into our own noble ranks as full citizens. How would you like to trade the circumscribed darkness of Nyrac for a dwelling like this, a score of slaves, a personal guard, a city for your private estate? How would you like a hand in shaping the future?"

"Hm." Rikard scowled and ran a hand through his stiff black hair. "You won't give me that for nothing."

"No, no. But you'll need a strong patron, my friend. Everyone else will assume as a matter of course that you'll be executed or sent to the mines. It will take all my influence to get you pardoned. In exchange, you can do me a few services." His teeth flashed white in his beard. "The first of which can begin now!"

"Hm?"

"I want you to kill a man for me."

"Well—" Rikard sat thinking a moment. "Who is he?"

"I'll come to that. It's nobody

you know or care about. If you fulfill that mission, there will be others, and your rise can be swift."

"You turn me loose with a sword," said the barbarian slowly, "and expect me to do just what you want?"

"Naturally," said Rayth, "I will keep your charming lady as a hostage." He smiled on Leda and a slow hot flush crept up her cheeks and stained her breast. "I shall see that she is not bored."

With a shave and a haircut, a decent tunic and a sword at his waist and a feather-cap tilted fakishly over one ear, Rikard could pass for anyone but the hunted rebel of Nyrac—a young guardsman off duty, perhaps, recruited from some recently conquered province and swaggering into the civilization which had swallowed his people. He drew no special attention as he pushed through the crowded hubbub of the city, except from an occasional bold-eyed maiden.

Toward the north side of the dome, roughly at ground level, was the area of those who were more than simple freemen without being quite nobles—merchants, shopkeepers, independent artisans of all kinds. Moving through that district, Rikard was struck by the bearing of the

folk, neither servile nor haughty, neither uncouth nor overly mannered, a more civilized version of the barbarians, egalitarianism. It occurred to him that this class was an element which had entered into no one's calculations.

But he had a mission, and the farther he went the more desperate it began to seem.

There's little choice, he thought grayly. If I'd refused, he'd have had me slain then and there. But that I, who was chief over the freemen of Nyrac, should sink to be Rayth's assassin—!

Kill the Chief Engineer of Coper City.

Rayth had shown him the layout, warned him that the Temple had its own guards, and said that several of his men had attempted the job before and failed bloodily. On the other hand, could he but accomplish his task and fight his way out of the Temple, there'd be a gang of the prince's bully boys waiting to escort him home. Rikard had pulled off more daring stunts than this.

As to why the old man should be murdered, Rayth had said little except that he stood in the way of certain plans, and Rikard, who had small tenderness for any Copers, didn't inquire further.

He cast a glance behind him now and again as he thrust through the crowds which

swarmed and eddied around bazaars, taverns, and playhouses, and once or twice thought he glimpsed a couple of the prince's hard-faced personal guards lounging inconspicuously after him—but he wasn't sure, the mob was too much a blend of every element in Luna. A richly dressed, pot-bellied merchant borne in a litter by four slaves; a pair of gay young warriors staggering out of a tavern compartment; a hawker shrieking his wares where two corridors ran together; a wondering leather-clad barbarian; a fantastically painted strolling player, thrumming his harp and grinning at the girls as they went by; a humble gray worker; a serious-faced young Engineer, his long red robes swirling about him—it was a gay and noisy throng, a whirl of life and color, and Rikard could not altogether suppress an answering smile. There was nothing like this in the poor little outlier towns.

He came from the passageway to a broad, grassy plaza, and felt a sudden tightening of his muscles and a rising throb in his breast. Beyond it, there was a great wall reaching the height of many levels, porticoed and velvet-hung, with the sign of holy Earth inlaid above the door. The Temple.

It was past time for services,

and few people were in sight before the wall—mostly acolytes hurrying on their various tasks, and six Temple guardsmen standing rock-stiff in gilt breastplates and plumed helmets before the looming gate. Rikard stood for a moment studying them, the long pikes and the swords at their hips, and wondered how many more there were inside the sacred precincts. He drew a deep breath, filling his nostrils with the cool rich scent of grass and flowering shrubs for perhaps the final time.

Well—Leda was still Rayth's hostage. He shook himself, straightened his back, and walked boldly up to the gate.

Two pikes slanted across his path. "Hold! What do you wish?"

"I have to see the Chief Engineer."

"This is not the time for audiences. Come back after the sunrise ceremonies."

"It won't keep. I bear special news from the Lands-that-see-not-Earth."

The guards captain's face lit with a flicker of interest. "What is it?"

"It's for the ears of his Wisdom alone."

"Then wait your turn."

"Look here," said Rikard, "you can send him a message that it concerns certain newly found ores of power. If his Wisdom

isn't interested, I'll go my way. But if you don't do this much, I'd hate to be in your skin when he learns what you've kept from him."

"Hmmm—well—" The captain rubbed his chin. There was a superstitious awe deep within his eyes, and the other sentries gaped. "Well, all right." He peered narrowly at the barbarian. "You're not of the city. Where are you from?"

"Moonburg, if you must know. But my message!"

The captain blew a whistle, and an acolyte came forth from within to receive the word and run back with it. Rikard stood waiting, trying not to shiver with the gathering tautness of the moment. Rayth had told him to give this message, and it seemed to work. The prince had added that the Temple was seeking to recover the lost secret of the legendary Tommic's Power, so immensely more potent than the sunlight batteries, but had not gone far for lack of the necessary metals. To Rikard, Tommic had merely been a local god worshipped by some towns, though in other stories he was the devil responsible for the Fall.

"Your sword," said the captain.

Rikard shrugged. It was understandable that no visitor

should bear weapons within the Temple, especially after Rayth's last few attempts. He unslung his glaive and handed it over, and permitted them to search him for concealed knives. It did not seem to occur to them, in spite of his hard-thewed size, that hands and shod feet have killed men.

The acolyte returned, a full Engineer with him. The latter spoke hurriedly. "Who are you, stranger, and what is this word you bear?"

"I am Atli Athur's son of Moonburg, your Knowledge," said Rikard, bowing as low as his stiff-necked soul permitted him. "If it please you, this word I have should not be discussed out in public."

"No—no—certainly not. I'll take you to his Wisdom. Follow me."

Rikard went after the swirling red robe, his narrowed eyes taking careful note of everything they passed. Down a long muraled corridor, opening into rooms which seemed oddly little like religious centers—they glittered with metal and glass and plastic, and Engineers in drab, stained smocks labored with a bewildering variety of instruments, past a couple of guardsmen—

The thing to do, he thought grimly, was to break the old

fellow's neck, grab a sword from the nearest armed man, and try to cut his way out. None of Rayth's men were allowed inside the Temple, but if they were waiting just beyond the gates he might have some chance.

The corridor ended in a tall doorway where four sentries in gold and scarlet stood by rigidly held pikes. Beyond was the great audience chamber.

It was lavishly furnished, gold and jewels and velvet and the lovely ancient works. The far side was a great sheet of plastic opening on the raw splendor of landscape and an Earth at the full, its eerie blue radiance streaming in to blend with the soft glow of fluorotubes. Rikard had little time for esthetics; his gaze roved in search of enemies.

No soldiers in this room, and the Engineer who guided him was closing the massive door on the sentries—praise the gods, it gave him a chance to kill the Chief and burst out and surprise those men! About a dozen Engineers stood around the Throne of Wisdom—high-ranking to judge from their robes, most of them young and burly, not a one of them bearing sword or dagger.

Rikard knelt before the Throne until a voice that was almost a whisper said: "Rise, my son, and say your message."

"Thank you, your Wisdom." The rebel got up and moved closer to the old man who sat before him. A very old man, he saw, thin and stooped and frail, with a halo of white hair about the gaunt face and the luminous eyes and the wonderful dome of a forehead. For an instant, Rikard depised himself.

But Leda, Leda of the fair tresses and the low sweet laughter and the undaunted gallantry, Leda was hostage to Rayth.

"You brought word of ores of power found on the far side of Luna," said the Chief Engineer. He pursed his lips and tapped his knee with the jeweled slide rule of his office. "But how would the heathen there know what to look for?"

"They weren't looking for anything, your Wisdom," replied Rikard. He stood some five feet away—one easy jump. "It was a certain Engineer-educated trader from this city, Borsu by name, who several years ago was captured by Moonburg men attacking a caravan of his. I had him for slave, but he was so bold and wise a man that soon we were more friends than master and servant, and it was he who organized an expedition to the heathen lands. He thought their ores, which we on Earthside have little exploited, could be obtained for our manufactured goods at

a fine profit and sold here in Coper City. It was he who saw those deposits and had them mined. On our return, we found that Moonburg had been brought under your city's rule, but nevertheless—"

They were relaxing their wariness, intent on his account.

"—we thought that we could still do business, especially with the Temple. As Borsu was ill, I left him in Moonburg and came myself to—"

He hit the Chief Engineer with a smack of bodies and his hands closed around the thin neck.

Thunder and stars exploded in his skull. He reeled aside, falling to the ground, and the Engineer rushed on him with the club he had pulled from his long sleeve.

Rikard kicked out, and the Coper flew backward, grunting. The barbarian snarled and lurched to his feet. Swords and daggers gleamed as the others yanked them from concealment.

Trapped. They weren't stupid, these Engineers, and now he was trapped!

Rikard hurled himself forward in a flying tackle, hit the nearest man and rolled over on the floor with him. Wrenching the fellow's dagger loose, he bounded back to his feet and rushed another Engineer.

"Alive!" screamed the old man. "Take him alive!"

For the torture cells—no! Rikard closed with the Engineer, stabbing him in the shoulder before he could slash with his sword. He pulled the glaive loose and backed toward the wall, growling, sword in one hand and dagger in the other. The men formed a defensive line around their Chief and brandished their blades.

The wounded Engineer rose suddenly and sprinted for the door. Rikard threw the knife after him, missed, and groaned as the door was swung wide and the four guardsmen entered.

"Ha, Nyrac!" he yelled and threw himself upon them. His sword whistled, clanged off the metal shaft of the nearest pike, and raked the cuirass beyond. Another guard hit him with the butt of his pike and he staggered. Now the blows rained on him, smashing thunder of violence and lightning-shot darkness. The sword fell from his hand and he toppled, still cursing. Someone kicked him as he fell.

He lay there, half conscious, mumbling through a mask of blood while they bound him. When the reeling and the blurring ended, and only the thumping pain and the slow drip of red were left, he sat up and

glared at them where they stood around him.

"I thought Rayth was wiser than that," muttered an Engineer.

"It wasn't a bad trick." The old man fingered his throat with a wry smile. "He almost made it. But who are you, so bold as to go alone and unarmed in war against the Temple?"

Rikard shook his ringing head. The sickness in him was as much from stupefied dismay as from his hurts. That he should have failed—that he should have been captured and bound like a pig for slaughter the second time!

"Hm—now let me think." The Chief Engineer stroked his chin. "Obviously Rayth would only have tried this with an assassin so bold and strong that there would be some chance of success, and at the same time one over whom he had enough of a hold to drive him to this desperate mission. Now it is only ten or fifteen hours since we heard that the mighty Rikard of Nyrac had been captured by this same Rayth."

"Rikard of Nyrac—aye, your Wisdom, they said he was big and dark, it must be he. Right?" A foot kicked the prisoner.

"Gently, Wanno, gently. There is no cause to maltreat him when he is helpless. Nobody was killed

in this little affair." The Chief Engineer stooped over Rikard and smiled. "See here, my friend, I have no ill will for you. I've chuckled for a long time over your impudent bearding of the Coper lords, and I wouldn't mind doing you a good turn if you'd let me."

"But first I have to do something for you, eh?" Rikard grinned without humor. "It seems to be a city custom."

"Be reasonable, man. You've failed your mission; Rayth will have no further use for you, and only here is there protection. I daresay you've no love for Rayth, and he is our greatest enemy as well."

Rikard was silent.

"Now what reason did you have to do his foul work for him? I cannot quite imagine Rikard of Nyrac turning assassin for hire."

"They say a woman was captured with him, your Wisdom," said one of the Engineers thoughtfully.

"Ah, so. And Rayth holds her. Hm." The Chief Engineer paced back and forth, the robes swirling around his thin stooped form. Suddenly he said: "Bring this man a bowl of wine."

It was a fire coursing in his veins, the leaden haze lifted from his mind and he looked at his captors with cleared eyes. The Chief Engineer said to him:

"Rikard, this is the situation in Coper City. The old bold dynasty of the Mayors has faded till the last of them sits bibbing in his apartments with little interest in anything save a new wench. Meanwhile the struggle for the real power over this growing empire lies between the great nobles, of whom Rayth is chief, and the Temple, which recruits from all ranks and is thus closer to the people and more alive to their wants. The world has come down far since the Fall. What was a wise and glorious and adventurous civilization has been destroyed, and this, its successor, is stagnant and cruel and ignorant; it has done little which was new or decent in a thousand years. I do not say that the Temple is blameless; the early Chief Engineers found it convenient to monopolize what true knowledge was left and to ally themselves with the nobles in crushing the commons. But in the past generation we have tried to make some amends, we have spoken against human slavery and unjust laws, and we would like to teach all men enough to make them more than walking bellies. Temple and nobles agree that man must be united—"

Rikard snarled at him.

"—but it is rather for us to learn freedom from the barbar-

ians, in exchange for our order and culture, than for them to be enslaved by us; and there is a sharp split between the parties. Furthermore, we have tried to regain the ancient knowledge by the methods with which it was won in the first place—that is, by trying our ideas to see if they work, rather than by blind acceptance of ancient authority. You must have noticed our laboratories as you entered. But this leads to heretical questioning of everything, and the nobles do not like it.

"Thus Rayth has several times sought to have me assassinated. There is little I can do save guard against it—I would get no satisfaction in the courts. If he should succeed, he could use his influence and very likely get one of his own hand-picked Engineers named to my office. For we—scientists—are a small party in the Temple, and only the more or less accidental fact that I was converted to such views shortly after assuming the slide rule has given us our success. If we could somehow overcome him, there would be a chance to make some improvement in human life, perhaps even to reach Earth eventually. If we fail, as seems all too probable, the long night will descend completely."

He stopped, and there was a

moment's silence in the great chamber. Then Rikard said: "I suppose you're telling me more or less the truth. I don't really care, one way or the other. But why? What do you want of me?"

"I don't know," said the Chief Engineer frankly. "I really don't know whether it wouldn't be safer all around just to return your head to Rayth. But—Rikard, the Temple has been at one grave disadvantage. Its younger men are often doughty fighters, as you have seen, but they are still mostly technicians, intellectuals, people without practical experience in warfare. You, on the other hand, have fought all your life. If you have any suggestions, they will be carefully considered."

"And what do I get from this?"

"Your life, of course, and your freedom. Likewise your woman's, if we can save her. We can talk later of other rewards. You may find it worthwhile to work with us."

Rikard leaned back against the wall, letting his mind slide over the facts and the chances. Presently he nodded his blood-matted head and began to talk.

The Temple gate burst open and the big man shot out in a flying leap that carried him over the heads of the sentries to land

on the plaza grass. A spear flew after him. He grabbed it and whirled about and threw it back.

"Stop him!" roared an Engineer. "Kill him! He killed the Chief!"

The guards sprang at Rikard, yelling, and others boiled out of the Temple in their wake. He was already fleeing toward the corridor beyond. A shrieking laborer sought to bring him down—he kicked the man in the teeth, beat another aside with the flat of his sword, and pushed a way into the suddenly milling throng.

Half a dozen armed men were around him, blades flashing out. One grinned savagely in his beard. "We thought you were dead," he gasped. "You were in there so long—"

"We'll all be dead if we don't get out of here," snapped Rikard.

The raging Temple warriors were crowding through the press of humanity toward them. And from the swirling mob there seemed to rise one great groan. "*The Chief is dead . . . The Chief is dead . . . They killed him, the dirty murdering nobles—*"

The old fellow's claim to be beloved of the people was not a lie, thought Rikard tautly, and crammed a fist into the mouth of the nearest man who rushed, weeping and cursing at him.

Swords and pikes clattered together as the guards hit the tight circle of Rayth's warriors. Rikard led the retreat, his sword whistling and thumping—he did not cut, but he hammered a way through the mob, and it fell back before his great bloody shape.

"The ramp—over there—"

They braced themselves and leaped, ten feet straight up, arcing forward to land on the upward-curving surface. Then they ran!

A hurled spear flashed, and one of Rayth's men toppled. Two more had been pulled down by the bare hands of the commons, and another had fallen in the retreat. The crowd, half angry, half frightened, moved slowly after them.

They dashed into a corridor on the noble level, and the two city guardsmen posted there clanged the gate shut in the face of pursuit. Panting, they stopped and looked at each other.

"There'll be Mars to pay down there," said the leader hoarsely. "Riots—"

"Take me to his Excellency," said Rikard.

"Aye—at once—and good work, barbarian! You did a job that we've tried to do for the past five years."

They went swiftly down the long passageways, up ramps and stairs, past the sumptuous apart-

ments of the rich where men and women, children and servants and slaves cowered at sight of drawn weapons and at the faint, rising noise of the lower levels. When they came to Rayth's door, they entered without ceremony.

The prince leaped to his feet, spilling his wine-glass, and the lean bearded face blazed at Rikard. "Is it done?" he yelled. "Did you really do it?"

"Aye—aye—" The rebel leaned wearily on his sword and let his eyes rove the chamber. There were seven or eight other men seated around the table, mostly older and fatter than Rayth but all with the rich dress and the inbred hauteur of the rulers. There was also a high-ranking Engineer, a sly-faced elderly man whose heavy-lidded eyes barely flicked over the newcomers before retreating back to their own dreams. But it was to Leda that Rikard's gaze went first, Leda who had been sprawling sullen and splendid on a couch and who now started up and ran to him and clung wordlessly to his bleeding form.

"Aye, he's dead," nodded the barbarian.

"It took you several hours," said Rayth. "I was sure you had failed."

"They made me wait a long time while the Chief finished an

—an experiment, they called it. But I got at him, broke his neck, and grabbed a sword and chopped my way out." Rikard strode boldly over to the table and grabbed up a glass and drained it.

"Do you hear that?" Rayth turned on the others and his voice rose to a shout. "Do you hear that?" His laughter was loud and wild. "He's dead! His Wisdom Laon XIII, Chief Engineer of Coper City, is dead! Are you ready to assume the post, Jastur?" he cried to the Engineer. "Would you like to take the name of Laon XIV?"

"It might be a good idea to wait for some confirmation," said the other imperturbably.

Rayth paced the chamber, restlessly, eyes smoldering, and the guests muttered to each other. Rikard and Leda paid no attention; they were holding close, and his hands and lips caressed her with a new and desperate tenderness.

Someone else entered, a strong young acolyte who saluted and said between gasps for air: "He's dead, sirs, he's been killed, and it's Mars down there! The commons are running wild!" There was a knife-slash across his face; blood dripped slowly to the red of his gown.

"What did you see?" snapped Rayth. He sprang over and grab-

bed the acolyte by the shoulders and shook him. "What did you see?"

"I—I heard a great uproar in the audience chamber, through the closed doors. That must have been something else, though, for his Wis—old Laon came out and went into a laboratory. Then some hours later he returned to the chamber, and—and presently there was another noise, louder and lasting longer—then I saw this man here burst out, knock down a guard in his way, and go down the hall. I looked in—they were lying heaped in blood, and an Engineer came in and lifted the old man and shrieked that he was dead. Then there was panic, everyone running, guards fighting to get out after the killer—I slipped away and came here as you told me, sir—"

"Dead!" Rayth's shout echoed between the walls. "Dead, d'you hear? After five years I've killed the old swine, and Temple and commons alike are rioting—What more excuse do we need?"

"Excuse?" whispered a noble. "Certainly!" Rayth grinned. "As a public-spirited gesture, we assemble our personal guards and march them down there to restore order. With the Temple occupied by us, your election to the slide rule becomes a certainty, Jastur."

"There'll be fighting," said the Engineer nervously. "The young Engineers are—were—almost all on his side, you know; they won't receive you kindly—and then there are the commons—"

"Bah! Engineers and mobs against trained blades? Certainly there'll be bloodletting, but it won't be our blood—at least, if we can get down there before they have time to organize."

Rayth lifted his voice to a shout, and a guards officer stepped in and saluted. There was something like terror under his hard-held mask. Rayth snapped swift orders and he ran off.

"We'll unite all our personal forces," said the prince, biting the words out as he paced from wall to wall. "The Mayor's men and the regular city guards aren't to be relied on; I wouldn't be surprised if half of them swung to the Temple's side if they get a chance. Most of the regular army is out of the city, on garrison or combat duty, and it wouldn't be too safe either. But between us we've got three hundred trained bold men ready to follow us down there."

"Us?" squeaked a noble.

"Oh, stay if you want. I'm going down!" Rayth turned to clap Rikard's shoulder. "You too, my friend. You've done well, oh, excellently well, and you'll have a rich reward!"

The Nyracan shrugged. Inwardly, he was filled with a sudden wonder as to whether he had done the right thing or not. He didn't much care, really, who won; they were all Copers to him—but the prince's payment was more certain and tangible than the Temple's, and—

Too late now.

He went into the bathroom, where Leda washed and bandaged his hurts and whispered to him: "There is more behind this than you say, my dearest. I know you too well."

"Aye, there is, but I can't tell you now. Stay close by me and don't be too surprised at anything I may do."

Leda went back to Rayth and said: "Give me a blade too."

"You—a woman?" he asked.

"I've sent more men to Earth than you ever did," she snapped. "From here on, Rikard and I fight together."

"Well—I hate to risk such beauty being hacked up—but far be it from me to oppose that beauty's lightest wish," laughed the Coper. "Remember, though—you'll be among my own troops, and they don't take kindly to traitors."

She smiled at him. "How could anyone betray you?" she whispered.

"The oldest trick in the world," sighed Rayth, "and it

still works. Very well, take what you wish from the armor chest over there."

She and Rikard equipped themselves with weapons—a sword for her, an ax for him—cuirasses, and helmets. By that time they could hear the sound of marching feet. Rayth buckled on his own armor, lifted his sword in a mocking salute to his timorous comrades, and walked out into the hall.

It was a strong and well-trained force, filling the corridor with hard bodies and edged steel, pikes and axes aloft, raising a shout that roared and boomed down the hall as Rayth appeared. He put himself in the van, with the barbarians in the second rank behind his, and the troop started off to battle.

Clang of booted feet slammed echoing on the metal floor, rattle and clash of armor, grim jests tossed from lip to bearded lip. These were the killers, the professionals without fear of man or Earth, the trained elite which formed an army within an army and the fulcrum of the noble power. Watching them, marching with them, Rikard felt a sudden sick doubt within him. Untrained barbarians had toppled before this iron weapon—

They came to the closed gate, and Rayth unlocked it and led

the way down the ramp beyond. Level after level dropped past them, deserted now, silent and empty, but the broken roaring from below had grown, screaming its outrage, screaming for blood.

When they emerged on a landing at the ceiling of the Temple level and looked down twenty feet, it was to a boiling pool of humankind, gray workers, naked slaves, velvet merchants, leather artisans, women and children, howling and trampling until the din shook the walls and rattled the teeth in a man's skull. The surge of white, hating faces reached beyond vision, mouths agape, eyes red and running, animal voices barking and clamoring. Rikard had never seen a true mob before, and the elemental violence of it shook even his calloused soul. It did not occur to him to regret the fact that many of these people must die.

Rayth stood for an instant stroking his beard, thinking, and then he lifted his sword and sprang over the rail. The lines followed him, jumping one by one, a dozen men simultaneously floating down with pikes reaching beneath them.

They landed among the mob, hewing a clear way even as they fell, and struck out. The crowd surged back, leaving red remnants underfoot, and the troopers

continued to leap—forward ranks pressing toward the Temple, while the rearward lines were still jumping. Rayth's blade whistled and butchered; his face was alight with a dark glee. Rikard and Leda, sandwiched between others, could do nothing but add the weight of their bodies to the mass of the troop. The pack howled and bayed and cursed around them.

Missiles began to fly, hammers, ore-lumps, crowbars, wrenches, anvils hurled by brawny arms. A guardsman staggered and fell, his face cracked open. Another was seized by the cloak, dragged into a group of women, and carved with butcher knives. A third had his pike snatched from him, and a big smith jabbed it into the throat of a fourth before he was killed. The crowd gave way before the ruthlessly advancing soldiers, but it closed behind them and filled the air with noise and flying death.

"They killed the Chief!"

Leda's eyes were wide and her breast rose and fell behind the binding corselet. Her voice came dimly to Rikard under the boom and howl of raw voices. "They hate us!"

"So they do." He smiled bleakly.

Now the Temple was before them, its high wall looming over

the trample and clamor, a thin line of its own guards holding back the rioters. Rayth's red blade lifted anew, and his bugler wound a single harsh note. The troop moved forward on the double.

Vaguely, Rikard heard the prince calling to the guards, "Let us through—Mayor's order—protect you—"

"No one goes in—you bloody swine!"

The bugle screamed again and the soldiers locked ranks and charged.

Swords and pikes clanged at the gate; the sudden recoil hurled the rear lines backward. Rikard grabbed Leda's flowing hair and pulled her ear close to his lips and muttered swiftly, "Listen, we're with the Temple. First chance you get, break free and go over to them—once we're inside!"

She clasped his hand, briefly, and then the sentries were down and the troop rushed inside.

Beyond was a long narrow darkness of corridor. Nothing stirred, nothing spoke; they hastened through a fumbling gloom with only their footfalls and hoarse breathing and clash of metal for company. Rikard heard Rayth's voice, puzzled. "Where are the others? The Temple has plenty of its own guardsmen, where are they? Has everyone

fled?" Then, he laughed. "If so, why, it makes our task all the easier. Forward!"

They burst into the great audience chamber, and it was lighted and the Temple was waiting for them.

The young Engineers were reinforced by commoners, weapons in hand and armored in spacesuits.

The invaders let out one roar and the forward ranks hurled spears that bounced off metal and plastic and tough cord. From the Engineers, arrows suddenly darkened the air, the whistling death flamed among the soldiers and the lines sagged amidst their toppling members.

There was a press from the rear, men driven forward, and in the instant's bawling panic only Rikard knew what it was—the Temple guardsmen, aided perhaps by armed commoners themselves, throwing their power out of the rooms and side passages where it had lurked, blocking the troop's retreat and falling on it from the rear!

The line eddied and swirled about him, spears flying, arrows and hurled throwing-axes, the ranks of Rayth buckling under pressure from both ends. Time to get out of here, before anyone suspected that he, Rikard of Nyrac, had led them into the trap.

He turned on the man beside him and his ax hewed low, shearing through flesh and bone of a leg. As the screaming warrior fell, he brought his weapon up, a backhanded blow crashing into the face beyond. The man behind him thrust from the side; he took the spear on his cuirass and kneeed viciously. Stooping over, he undercut another of his late companions, and Leda reached over his back to slash down the soldier beyond.

Rikard bent his knees and leaped, soaring over the fallen, a dozen pikes stabbing up after him. He hardly noticed the sharp bright pain where one raked his thigh; he was through their line and Leda was with him. They drifted down among the Engineers.

A big red-faced young man snarled behind his space helmet and lifted an ax as Rikard descended. Someone else grabbed his arm. The helmets were left propped open, and his voice could reach. "No, Shan, those are friends!"

"Oh, sorry—I forgot." Shan swung about and spattered the brains of the nearest trooper.

The fight was now pressed into the audience chamber; men jammed together, slashing and hacking at arm's range—there'd soon be more room, thought

Rikard grimly, and took his place in the Engineer line. The Temple, though, had order and plans of a sort, however relatively untrained its fighters were, while the invaders were broken up into knots and fragments where their discipline could not exist. The important thing was to hit them, and keep hitting them, so they didn't get a chance to reform.

His ax smote, clanging off metal, raking the face and the arm behind. A blade hacked at him; he caught it on his helve and turned the blow and hewed back. Leda was beside him, her clear war-cry raising as she stabbed and struck; Shan the Engineer was chopping and roaring pious mottoes on his other flank; the Temple men pushed against the roiling soldiers, took their blows on their heavier armor, and gave them back with murder behind. The clamor of men and metal was a roar as of sundering worlds.

Rayth was fighting like a demon, his blade whirling and shrieking, his voice lifted in a rallying-cry that drew his scattered followers together. He had courage, thought Rikard above the snarl of combat—perhaps he was a fitter chief after all. But too late now!

Ha, there went another, tumbling with his head half off his

shoulders—so, a helmet crumpled, and the skull beneath it.

Back and forth the battle raged, breaking and tearing, ruining the chamber and the lives of men, and over it lifted the great calm disc of Earth and the million scornful stars. Back and forth, trampling, sundering, killing and laming, and Rikard was painted with blood and his arms grew weary from swinging the ax.

The chamber began to clear as men fell; it was floored with corpses and one had room to cast a spear or take a flying leap down on the head of an enemy. The soldiers had suffered hideously, but there were many Temple dead, ordinary guardsmen, scantily armored commoners, Engineers with their spacesuits pierced or their helmets cloven. The fight was breaking into knots and clusters, small whirlpools of murder swaying back and forth over the great blood-wet space, men springing through the air at each other. It seemed to Rikard, as he raised blurred eyes toward holy Earth, that the disc had grown noticeably gibbous—had they fought that long?

"Over here! Stand and fight, men of Coper!"

It was Rayth, backed into a corner above a high heap of fallen Temple men, foremost in

a grim and haggard line of troopers hurling back wave after wave. Rikard shook his head, a sudden dark sense of destiny on him, and moved across the floor with lifted ax.

"You," said Rayth, very softly. "You—the triple turncoat—" Suddenly he threw back his head and laughter pulsed in his throat. "Oh, it was lovely, man, lovely, I never thought you had that kind of brains! Shall we play the game out?"

He stepped from his line, tossing his sword and catching it again, kissed his hand to Leda, and fell into an alert position before Rikard. The barbarian growled, squared off, and fell on him.

Rayth danced aside from the shrieking ax, and his blade whipped in against Rikard's throat. The rebel rolled, barely ducking the thrust, and Rayth grinned without much malice and sprang at him. His sword clattered and yelled, biting the Nyracan's arms, bouncing off the hard-held guard to sing around his opponent's ears. Rikard fell back, grunting in surprise, and Rayth pursued him, lightfooted, leaping, playing with him.

Scream and clangor of steel, hoarse gasps for breath, bounding human forms in a strange and terrible grace of murder,

clash and bite and two faces staring into each other's eyes across the web of flying metal. Rikard hewed out again and again, cleaving empty air; his phantom enemy was somewhere else to rake him until he staggered and splashed his blood on the floor.

Leda yelled and sprang on Rayth from behind. His sword whirled around, caught in the guard of hers and sent it spinning free, and slewed back to meet Rikard's charge. He retreated before the rebel's rush, laughing, parrying blow after clumsy blow, waiting for the end.

It came swiftly. Rikard's bull charge forced Rayth back into a corner where he braced himself and smiled. As the ax whirred down toward his skull, he lifted his blade to parry it as he had done before—and the steel broke across.

Rikard stood gasping, reeling on his feet, looking down at the body of his foe with a numbness stealing over him. He hardly noticed the sobbing girl who flung herself into his arms; he stood mute for a long while and when he spoke at last it was dully.

"That wasn't right. I didn't kill him—a flaw in his blade did—it isn't right, somehow."

The Chief Engineer came to Rikard where he stood watching the first harsh glare of sunrise creep over the heights of Copernicus. The barbarian leaned heavily on his woman. He had taken many hurts.

Laon's old face was drawn with weariness; there was no great triumph in him. "It's over," he said. "It was a bloody, horrible business, but we hold the entire city now, all levels; the nobles are our prisoners and the Mayor is our puppet and the Temple is victorious. Thanks to you, my friend."

"There is more to do," said Rikard. "The armies will hear about this, out in the conquered provinces, and many of them, at least, won't like it. There'll be hard fighting to hold what we have."

"Oh, yes. Though I think with some diplomacy, and with the provinces restless at their backs, they may decide—well, we must see. And afterward there is much more to do, generations of

work—Are you with us, Rikard?"

"I suppose so. I'll have to think about it. Nyrac should not be a mere province, but—well—I'll think about it."

"At least," said Laon, "we can rest a little while now."

"It's over, darling, darling," whispered Leda. "The fight is over."

Rikard held her close, but he was thinking of the armies beyond the city, and the restlessness of the conquered towns and the ruthless will of those still free; of the long task of raising men turned into brutes by centuries of injustice and oppression, of making them free and fit to use their freedom, and of all the evil elements which would be seeking to thwart that goal; of the still greater war to be fought by quiet men. In the Temple, the war to regain the lost wisdom of the ancients, the battle which would hammer out the long road back to Earth.

"No, Leda," he said, very softly, "it's just beginning."

Poul Anderson and your editor, Wade Kaempfert, have at least one thing in common. Both have trouble getting others to pronounce their names the way it sounds best to them, though Poul puts his trouble first, and Kaempfert last. For the purists, it's Pole Anderson and Wade Kemfer. Any other major problems you want solved?

ROUTE TO THE PLANETS

by

WADE KAEMPFFERT

By now, most writers and readers of science fiction know that the chances of a spaceship taking off from Earth and going directly to Mars are pretty small. It's going to be a lot easier to build a station in space and then take off from that than to build a ship that can reach Mars at one jump.

But the navigating maneuvers that will be used to get from the station to another planet have been pretty generally glossed over. In fact, most accounts of it are almost 100 per cent wrong. The best way to get to a planet from a space station isn't to head toward the planet from the nearest point. Instead, it's a lot easier if you'll start off by going away from the planet you want to reach!

The idea of using the space station isn't so hard to justify, but the second paragraph seems a little more tricky. Let's see what happens.

First, we'll have to have our station built, but this has been well covered elsewhere. While it seems to me that a station less than five hundred miles from Earth would be more practical, the figure of 1,000 miles is generally accepted now, so we'll use that.

Such a station will be traveling around the Earth at a speed of about 4.4 miles a second. To reach it, however, a spaceship will have to attain a speed of 5.4 miles a second. This is still a lot easier than having to reach 7 m/s, as it would have to do to escape from Earth completely.

To go to Mars from Earth, another 1.4 m/s is needed, bringing the total up to at least 8.4 m/s. And since in practice, the air resistance of the first few miles is a serious problem, it would probably take even more fuel than the figure indicates. But using the minimum figure, it still requires three miles a second less velocity to reach the station than to reach Mars directly.

That represents a tremendous amount of fuel. And naturally, if several ships make such trips to the station, they can build up a supply

of fuel which will enable one ship to fill its tanks completely before taking off for Mars from that station.

Once the ship reaches the station, it requires less fuel to reach Mars than it did to get up that first thousand miles. The station's speed of 4.4 miles a second can be used, by choosing the right orbit; and that means that to reach the necessary 8.4 m/s for the Mars trip, only 4 additional m/s will be needed!

Obviously, once a ship can be refueled in space, the problem of reaching the red planet is simple—provided you can figure out some way to land and return. Actually, the first trip will probably simply circle Mars, taking pictures, without landing.

Now let's see how the pilot is going to go about the business of taking off from the station. He can wait until the station is closest to Mars, and simply blast up. But in that case, of course, he hasn't gained much, since he isn't using any of the station's own speed (which is naturally also the speed of his ship on the station.)

Or he can wait until the station itself is heading toward Mars in its circle. That is, if Mars is ahead at 12 o'clock, he'll wait until the station is at 9 o'clock. At that point, all of the station's velocity is added to his exhaust velocity, and he's working with the figures we used above.

This looks fine, and is the system most writers who have bothered to worry about details have used.

Still, in rockets every bit of fuel must be saved. If you're using step-rockets—as men will use in the early days of rockets, at least—a few final pounds mean hundreds of take-off pounds.

There's one way in which the pilot can save some additional fuel. He can wait until the station has gone past the nearest approach to Mars (at 12 o'clock) and is nearly at one o'clock—heading away from Mars.

This time he takes off and heads toward Earth, using just enough fuel to drive him down toward the planet below. He doesn't hit the atmosphere, however. He chooses an orbit which will let him skim the Earth at perhaps two hundred or three hundred miles above Earth, where there is no air.

In this fall, he picks up speed. As he passes near Earth, the gravity of the planet hangs onto him, and he whips around Earth in a narrow turn (which requires no extra fuel, of course, since gravity does this for him). His orbit is a narrow ellipse, and it would normally carry him right back to the point where he took off.

But, just as he comes around Earth and heads back toward Mars, he blasts out full power, until he reaches the speed necessary to carry him to the red planet. In doing this whole maneuver, he uses a total amount of fuel less than in taking off from nine o'clock.

Why? Well, once his ship begins falling toward Earth, the gravity of the planet keeps building up his speed—as in any fall—until he turns. There he would lose speed from gravity pull again. But with the extra acceleration he's used, he's giving the planet less time to act on his ship with full gravity.

Suppose he starts falling at 4 m/s, and gravity builds his speed to 6 m/s. After the turn, he would normally be slowed down by gravity from this 6 m/s back to 4. But he uses his rockets to build up his speed from 6 to about 8 1/2 m/s.

It's obvious that it took longer for him to fall toward the Earth than it's going to take him to speed the same distance away. But gravity acts according to distance and time. Since he won't be in the high level area of gravity pull for as long a time going out as he was coming in, the pull of the Earth won't have a chance to subtract as much speed as it originally added. (At a distance of even a thousand miles from Earth, the pull of gravity is less than two-thirds as great as at the surface; at four thousand miles, it is only one-quarter; at twenty thousand miles, only one-twenty-fifth). Obviously, any trick which will decrease the length of time he spends fighting against the pull of Earth at close hand will decrease the amount of fuel he needs.

It won't be any great saving, but it will be well worth the time and trouble it takes.

This doesn't mean that the pilot is getting something for nothing, however. He hasn't violated the conservation of energy. And he hasn't really harnessed gravity, though it may look that way at first glance.

What he has actually done was simply to get back some of the energy used in carrying the fuel up to the station. Remember that he

fired his rockets while close to the Earth, after falling from further out. On the way down, the fuel was being pulled by the Earth, just as was his ship. But he fired it out before he began the outwards trip—and hence, the mass of the fuel is not there to be pulled back on the way out.

If you take a steel ball and lift it onto a chair, it gains potential energy from its higher position. Now let it roll off the chair and it falls, turning that potential energy back to kinetic. When it hits the floor, it gives up that energy—as you'll notice if you put your fingers under it!

The same applies to the fuel. In being carried out to the station, it acquired potential energy from its higher position. On being dropped back to a closer position, this energy was freed and used by the ship.

Mars was chosen for the planet in this case for one good reason. Venus is actually nearer, of course. But Venus has no satellites, while Mars does.

Sooner or later, men are going to want to get down to the surface of Mars and land there. This is going to take some extra fuel, though Mars has an atmosphere, and most of the deceleration can probably be done by going into a braking orbit which will use the resistance of the air to kill the speed. And of course the same can be done with Earth's atmosphere on the return.

However, getting back up requires fuel. And it will probably be easier to land on one of the satellites. The ship will draw up to Mars with considerable speed. By spitting a satellite moving around the planet away from the ship, it should save a great deal of braking to match speeds. And then, in taking off, the same maneuver can be used as was used in taking off from the space station.

In this case, no energy was seemingly involved in lifting the fuel from Mars to the satellite. But just the same, the fact that the fuel is above the planet gives it energy from its position which can be used in falling lower toward Mars.

It looks as if space travel is going to be a process of following the example of Great-Uncle Zeke. He got up one morning when it was so cold and the ice was so slick that he slipped back two feet for every foot he went forward. He had quite a time getting to where he was going, until he wised up. Then he turned around and went backwards.



Segue

BY BEN SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

Jubil had had his chance. But he'd washed out of the Academy while his friends went on to greatness—and to death. He'd missed the boat at every turn. But now there were no turns left, with raw space around him and death waiting on a lonely asteroid....



BERWIN

Jubil drifted slowly, alone except for the phosphorescent star shine that filtered through the face-plate of his suit. He was resting, conserving the oxygen that hissed steadily and quietly through the valve near his neck. It was time for peace; there had been too much violence already.

Once, as his body continued its involuntary and aimless turning, Jubil saw the dark hull of the *Mercury II*, the outer access door firmly closed now and the stern beginning to fluoresce with

the secondary radiation that betokened the firing of the drives. Still, Jubil could feel no anger at Radik.

When the crew had conspired to mutiny, when Radik, Olgan and the rest had decided to take over the operation of the *Mercury II*, at that time had been the need for honest anger. Jubil had hesitated weakly instead, had chosen to be a bystander and had suffered the fate of the average non-participant; he had been outcast from the closed circle of

both friend and enemy. Kane, once Captain of the *Mercury II*, was now dead and his discharred body drifting somewhere, in the spatial wilderness.

"Have you changed your thinking, Jubil?" It was Radik's voice in the helmet phones and Jubil could almost see the heavy face with its fringe of space-black beard. Jubil rested, listening to the cosmic interference in his R-link equipment.

"Jubil! Jubil Marken! Have you changed your mind?"

"Radik—" Jubil formed the words slowly, using his lips only and breathing shallowly. "Piracy suits you, Radik. You are one of the ruthless . . ."

Jubil could hear Radik's throaty chuckle. "A dead man of honor is still dead, Jubil." The communication circuit went silent except for the buzz of voices in the background. Jubil drifted on, conscious of the fact that he was moving but so full of the lethargy of the moment that he neglected it. What would it be like, this bit of time that was left? It had been an hour since Jubil had been forcibly ejected from the access door of the *Mercury II*; the flask at his back carried oxygen for four. Three hours of life—while around his slowly turning body was the agelessness of endless space. Jubil smiled, just a little, conscious

of the fact that he felt no fear. The die was cast now; he had made his decision finally, and he did not regret it.

"There is space-craft in Sector 180, Jubil," it was Radik again, "Racon has just reported it. But they'll miss you by at least ten parsecs. Have you changed your mind?"

"No."

"Very well." Jubil could see the pulsing of the *Mercury's* drives, now. Radik was taking no chances on the strange ship still light years away from his stern being patrol. "Good news for you, Jubil. You are in the gravitational field of an asteroid. You can't see it, yet; it's directly above you. But you'll drift to it and cling like a snail on a stone for as long as time itself. Good-bye, Jubil."

Strange, Jubil thought, that there was no anger in him now. There should be oxygen enough for a good two hours yet, so this eerie ennui could not be the prelude to a rising carbon dioxide quotient. A normal man would be bitter, perhaps even hysterical in his anger and his fear of death. Yet there was only this peaceful drifting toward the still-invisible asteroid that hung in space above his own head. Jubil closed his eyes, shutting out the phosphorescence of the velvet that was space. The exhaust

of the *Mercury II* might still be in sight. If so, it was not visible through the restriction of the plastic face-plate of Jubil's suit.

Jubil found himself wondering where Kane could have drifted since the captain's inert body had been shoved out of the *Mercury I*'s access door. Perhaps, even now, it was bound, like a rudderless ship, toward the self-same asteroid that would be Jubil's last and permanent home.

Thinking of Kane, Jubil remembered also Schoenbirk, the erratic genius whose mathematical theorizing was used in the design of the Schoenbirk-Halsted De-Fouling Gear. Had it been years, or lifetimes ago, when the three of them had been undergraduates together at the Academy?

Schoenbirk, working with the high electrostatic-potentials necessary to insure the exhaust of opposite-sign waste from the complex guts of the atomic drive had been blown to pieces by the accumulation of the very thing his device was designed to prevent. Random electrical forces gathering around the discharge ring until their workable mass became great enough to enter and initiate a chain reaction in the fuel storage tank. Along with Schoenbirk had gone even the tremendously heavy concrete walls of the laboratory. All that,

however, had been after Jubil had washed out of the Academy and gone into the space-freighters as a Drive-Engineer. In the intervening years, Jubil had become thoroughly familiar with the perfected Schoenbirk-Halsted . . .

Kane! There was a man who had made the Academy his own playground. Kane had passed with the greatest of ease, worked his way through astro-navigation, the Allen Drives, space-time computations . . .

Jubil grimaced wryly. It had been the latter with its advanced mathematics that had been his own downfall. So Kane had gone on to the first officer berth in a gilded passenger liner while Jubil developed radiation scars on his hands from "in the hole" engineering on decrepit freighters.

And the great leveller had met and conquered them all . . .

Schoenbirk, even in the explosion that took his life, had accomplished a great thing: the discovery of the final flaw in the De-Fouling Gear that had lived after him. For without proper removal of the ionized waste from its drive engines, the largest freighter became an ever-accumulating and treacherously unstable fissionable pile.

Kane—one of the legendary

figures of the history of astro-navigation." Kane with his Academy background and his proud but personable air had become one of the most talked-of Space captains who had ever lived. Jubil could still, in memory, see Kane, standing spread-kneed on the bridge of the *Comet*, one of the first; later the *Wanderer*, the first of the luxury space liners. The *Mercury*, and the *Mercury II*, the super-ships that made week-end excursion flights that spanned from galaxy to galaxy.

A misplaced decimal point and a misplaced trust and the greatness of Schoenbirk and Kane lay behind them. Even as his drifting body, cumbersome in the space-suit, touched the asteroid, Jubil was aware of a strange weariness that invaded every part of him except his mind. At least, the waning oxygen would leave him his thoughts.

He rested, conserving his strength. For what reason? The thing that was to happen was as certain as Fate and as unavoidable by the machinations of man. Was it, after all, because Jubil was prey to anger? No. He was now too near death for anger to seem important.

The face of the asteroid was cold and Jubil lay against it, held as lightly as a maiden's kiss by the ounce or so of gravity.

He was smiling as the darkness of space was suddenly brilliantly lighted. Spears of bluish flame, each with its tip of crimson, spread across the warp of time, and subconsciously Jubil found himself waiting for the shock wave. Then he laughed. In space there was no atmosphere; he would never be buffeted by the blast that had destroyed the *Mercury II* and the mutineer Radik.

Jubil thought again of the hellish radiation to which he had exposed himself. There was no other way. To destroy the delicate regulating linkage of the Schoenbirk-Halsted, a man must enter the combustion chamber where the pilot-piles idled. There had been just time enough for that, before Radik had sent for him.

Had there been ample oxygen, Jubil Marken knew that he would only have lived until his radiation-seared heart painfully failed to function. But, thanks to Radik, Jubil had been spared both the disintegration of the *Mercury II* and an agonizing death from slow radiation burn.

He was, Jubil reflected, as effective in his own way as was Schoenbirk and Kane. In the end, he was still an Academy man with them. He was peacefully smiling as he twisted tight the oxygen valve at his throat . . .

BREATHES THERE A MAN

BY CHARLES E. FRITCH

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Someone in the place where Dunlop worked was an agent of the World Bureau Investigation. But how could they suspect him at a time like this? His tracks were covered and tangled until even Julie had no knowledge of them. Then the robot came....

Arthur Dunlop busied himself over the blueprints as though he had a deep and sincere interest in them, unmindful of the scurry of sounds in the office. The incessant clicking of electronic typewriters, muffled though they were, combined to form a hum of angry bees. Papers shuffled that were important somehow to the welfare of the State, and men and women sat and looked at them, checking and rechecking, checking and rechecking, for it was important that nothing should go wrong, any place, in even the slightest aspect.

The small square of paper had been dropped on his desk unobtrusively, and for a brief moment he had stared at it in surprise. Then he covered it with

a casual hand and glanced up in apparent thoughtfulness. A blonde girl was making her way down the space between rows of metalloïd desks, a bundle of vital-appearing documents in her hands. Arthur studied the swaying body, as though that were the only thought on his mind, but the paper burned curiously at his palm.

He returned quickly to his work of checking blueprints, for idleness even in a trusted employee was looked upon with suspicion. He bent over the three-dimensional diagram, feigning interest, and slowly opened the folded square of paper. On it were written the words: "WBI. Careful." The words leaped up at him in a green ink that would

fade in seconds, leaving no trace.

He crushed the paper in his hand, trying hard not to look around him. WBI, World Bureau of Investigation. Did they suspect? he wondered. He thrust the thought from his mind and made a conscious effort to study the drawing on his desk.

Drawing 2b, one-tenth of the plan for a respirator, newly-designed and improved, streamlined for the year 2108. Arthur could just imagine the advertising they'd do on this model. But the other thought crowded it aside: the underground knew there was a WBI man in the office.

And just why would there be a WBI man here? Routine? Possibly. Yet more likely, somebody smelled a rat. This was no time for plans to go awry.

He looked up, glancing with apparent disinterest at the faces near him hovering over their respective desks. They, too, were busy with blueprints. Part 3d of a new atomic engine. Part 14c of a three-dimensional television set designed to bring in bigger and better commercials. Et cetera. Et cetera. For security reasons, no two worked at the same project.

He scanned their faces, searching for something indefinable, something that might outwardly betray hidden thoughts.

There was Hawkins, a middle-aged, eagle-faced person, been with the local office of State Enterprises for more than twenty years—unquestionably loyal to the government. Merker, a chubby person with shifting eyes behind thin-lensed glasses; he was okay, for shifting eyes or not, they had all been checked, even as *he* had been checked. And Austen, the newcomer, only twenty-five and fresh from college, a nervous; restless type of person; he was the most likely suspect for a WBI man, although some might think it would be too obvious—which might in turn tend to prove the point.

Arthur shrugged mentally and returned to his work. He stared at the design of coils and condensers and wires and felt a little sick, which was strange for he should have become used to it by now. This design, together with nine others, would form the complete pattern for printing a mechanism on a thin disc which would be inserted in the watch-like affair known as a respirator. It was somehow ironic, he thought that he should be working on it.

His intercom buzzed and he reached to flick on the switch. A business-like voice said: "Dunlop, this is Samson, can you come in for a minute?"

"Of course," Arthur said calm-



ly, but he wondered what his superior wanted. First, the note about a WBI man; now this.

The big door marked "Charles L. Samson, Mgr., Dept. 40" confronted him. As he neared it, electric eyes probed him, timed his approach, opened the door automatically.

Charles L. Samson, Mgr., Dept. 40, graying and cleanly mustached, was intently studying a sheet of paper on which were typewritten several paragraphs. Arthur drew to a halt before the man's desk, unconsciously fidgeting mentally and wondering if the item of interest on that paper concerned him.

The manager carefully put the paper down and raised his eyes. "Everything okay, Dunlop?"

"Simply great," he answered automatically.

The older man leaned back in his chair. "Dunlop," he said, "you've been here for some time now, I believe."

"Five years this month," Arthur supplied, trying to put pride in his voice.

"Precisely," Samson agreed. "And because you have been a loyal and dependable worker," he smiled blandly, "you'll find a little something extra in your pay envelope from now on."

Arthur breathed a sudden sigh of relief. So that was it, the automatic pay increase. It meant no

financial gain, of course, since he would also automatically be put in a higher tax bracket which would just offset the increase. Pay raises were for "morale" purposes only.

"Thank you, sir," Arthur said, hoping he sounded as though he meant it.

"Quite all right," Samson said, turning once more to his papers.

"Yes, sir." Arthur strode, relieved, from the office.

The rest of the workday passed uneventfully and it was time to leave. The soft hum of preparations testified to that. Plans were folded, locked securely into desks, and workers filed past probing mechanical eyes that scanned them for anything hidden. Doors whirled open electrically, and humanity poured through them into tubecars which hissed with sickening speed to the helibus terminal.

Arthur flowed into a helibus with the others, and his heart gave a sudden jump as he saw a familiar blonde form ahead of him. Julie! He wormed his way forward and sank onto the air-cushion beside her. She did not look at him. The helibus lurched skyward.

She was staring out the window, at the blue sky and the cloudfaces and the sun beginning to dip low at the horizon. The

building they had left glowed with the million setting suns reflected from its great bank of windows. After awhile, her fingers moved restlessly. Arthur Dunlop watched them idly. The movements were swift, seemingly random but actually precise and predetermined.

They said: "I couldn't hesitate at your desk; I had to take a chance with the note."

Arthur glanced complacently about him, stifling a yawn. His fingers rippled: "Who is the WBI agent?"

"Underground doesn't know—yet," she told him silently. "Meet me tonight."

"Will I see the leader?" he asked.

"Meet me tonight," was all she would reply.

He nodded, as though to himself, and stared at the signs adorning the inside of the bus. Names made familiar by television leaped at him. There was Ronson, Franklin, Stallman, Eliot, names of all kinds to give the impression of existence to a long-dead free enterprise; all were government owned, competing to enhance the illusion.

Who was the leader, he wondered, and why the secrecy? Some government bigwig probably, who kept his secret from all but a few. Well, time would tell.

He glanced out the window at the countryside rushing below. Trees. Green fields. The beginnings of the city of small square dwellings. A man got up, went to the rear of the helibus. After awhile, Arthur rose, went down the aisle to the exit platform. He paused for a minute, and then he stepped into space.

The air whirled about him; twin rotors, appearing from his clothing, churned and scraped the air, lowering him gently through the five hundred feet to the ground. Overhead, the helibus continued its prescribed journey, discharging passengers who resembled fluttering insects. He came to rest gently atop his roof, and the rotors ceased and folded invisibly beneath his coat.

The moon had risen well into the twilight sky, that moon which only a few hundred years before had furnished lovers with inspiration. Now, looking at it, one thought inevitably of the Lunar Prison Colony that occupied its entire surface, of the persons who had been sentenced to spend years on its ugly barren wasteland. Inspiration came possibly, but it was of a different nature.

He descended into the house, into the single room that was bedroom, living room, parlor. Helen, brunette and beautiful, attired in the semi-transparent

slacks that were the decreed style, rose from the couch and gave him a wifely peck on the cheek.

"Everything okay?" she asked, not appearing particularly interested. The standard question.

"Simply great," he said.

He settled into a hard plastic chair, uncomfortable but designed to improve posture.

The television set was blaring: "Nothing could be greater than to have a respirator made by Fra-a-a-a-nklin!" On the 40-inch screen a happy couple, Franklin respirators on their happy wrists, were bouncing happily across a miniature solar system, using planets for stepping stones.

I must be an atavist, he thought. How can people actually put up with this stuff. He could not subdue the grimace that rose automatically, but he managed to turn it into a grin as he saw Helen looking at him curiously.

"Something funny?"

"Nothing in particular." He couldn't very well tell her he thought a government-sponsored commercial was amusing. That was the equivalent of treason, for which the Lunar Prison Colony had been constructed.

Not that Helen wasn't understanding. Their marriage had been lacking in many things, true, but she was inclined to be

fair and broadminded on most issues which were not controlled. But when it came to things like the State and its directives, most people got emotionally patriotic. It was something like trying to discuss religion a century earlier, except that in the present case arguments could be easily won by sending the "treasonous" person to the prison satellite. The law made plain what was right and what was not.

"I was just thinking," he said, hoping to explain the grimace, "about a fellow at the office. He suggested that we should get a rebate on the airtax, because we don't utilize all the air we breathe in."

"You reported him, of course."

"Worse than that. We told him if he didn't like it he could stop breathing. Crime doesn't pay anymore."

"I should hope not," she said, and she seemed perfectly serious.

There was no point in arguing with Helen, so he didn't. She apparently had little interest in politics other than a layman's desire to see justice prevail, and if the government wanted to tax the air they breathed, why—let them; they were taxing everything else.

That's why he found himself drawn irresistibly to Julie; she wasn't a slave to convention. That's why he liked to meet her

in the darkness of the outside, when the curfew forbade anyone venturing into the night—at least, that was one reason. She was part of the forbidden fruit he secretly desired and vowed would have.

A government official's benign face appeared on the television screen to announce the Super State program. The World Flag materialized, waving in a studio-inspired breeze, and a chorus chanted: "Super State, Super State, Simply great is Super Sta-a-ate!"

"Sixty minutes of uninterrupted commercial," Arthur Dunlop thought with distaste. Plays and songs subtly presented to show that contemporary living was equivalent to a golden age. He was careful, however, not to let his face reveal his mind's opinion.

"The airtax man will be around to read the meter tonight," Helen reminded him.

"Fine," he murmured, but already he was only half-aware of the world around him as he dozed while appearing outwardly alert.

There was a time, he remembered vaguely, when there were no such things as respirators, when the air you breathed was free. For twenty of his thirty-four years he had known that golden era. There were taxes, of course, but only on the food you

ate, the money you earned, the entertainment you saw, et-cetera, almost ad infinitum. Air, it seemed—much to the government's evident dissatisfaction—was an untaxable commodity, a luxury which even the poor could enjoy without restriction.

Then came the war. The war that caused all peoples to finally unite under one government to insure peace. Arthur Dunlop knew of the war, for he was a part of it. He fought back to preserve his life, and they gave him a medal for it, a piece of cloth and metal which indicated that he was lucky enough to survive. It was another war to make the world safe for something or other, and he still recalled with a shudder the Battle of Boston, the Siege of New York, the great topplings of great cities into greater dust.

To counteract the poisonous by-products of civilized weapons, the respirators had been developed—small watch-like mechanisms that enabled the wearers to breathe in practically any atmosphere. After the war, they had been adapted to a new use.

"What?" Arthur Dunlop said.

Helen was extending a carton marked "6-C." "Mealtime," she declared.

He took the box, another development of the Last War, and opened it. Standardization was

the keynote, he remembered, for in that there is unity. Standardization of clothing, of living, of eating, of thinking.

He popped a pill marked "steak" into his mouth, nibbled absently at the ones labeled "bread" and "potatoes and gravy," and then followed with a pill called "coffee." It might have been funny had he been able to view the scene objectively, but the time when he had been able to do that had long passed. They were the best government-made pills and tasted not a bit like their labels.

From the television set, an enthusiastic voice declared: "Ronson Rotors are the best, Try the thousand foot drop test, Be convinced it'll break your fall, Ronson Rotors are the best of all!"

Furiously, Arthur Dunlop chewed on his pill marked "apple pie."

There was a knock at the door. "Air tax," an authoritative voice called, and the door slid open to reveal an impassionate face surrounded by uniform. "Your respirators, please," the face directed in a monotone. "Monthly check."

Arthur Dunlop extended his wrist, and the man, frowning importantly, noted several numbers from the respirator dial and wrote them in a small black book; he carefully examined the part

that would tell if the device had been removed.

Arthur resisted an impulse to ask the man for a refund for the Carbon Dioxide he had exhaled during the past month to see what reaction he might get. But the man, eager to get ahead, would welcome the opportunity to report someone less patriotic than he, and there would follow an investigation. Investigations were taken as a matter of course, naturally, and even investigators were being investigated with confusing regularity. But under the present circumstances, Arthur could hardly afford the risk. Entirely too much was at stake.

"You could use a new respirator," the air tax man said in the tone of a man who had said this same thing many times before.

"Yes," Arthur agreed mechanically. "What kind would you suggest?"

"What kinds do you like?" the man said testily.

Arthur named the various kinds and the merits professed by each, to show that he had been attentive to the telecasts. The man, secure in the knowledge that Arthur was loyal to the cause, left.

Arthur sighed a vague sigh that could mean almost anything and watched Helen stretch her long limbs, smooth and sensuous

beneath their thin coverings. He wondered what thoughts, if any, were in her mind, but her lovely face was vacuous and non-committal as she reclined to dutifully watch the screen as a good citizen should.

The evening grew old, and with its aging came the insistence of various televised personalities that each product cavorting about the screen was undoubtedly the best possible, and anyone who didn't agree was most certainly an idiot of the most idiotic sort. Actually, since the government directed the manufacture of all commodities, it mattered little which product was bought, so long as they were bought. Finally—

"Time to go to bed," a grandfatherly individual intoned gently from the set. "Remember: to bed and to rise at a time not late, makes one healthy and wise for the Super State."

Arthur grimaced at the benign gentleman's countenance, but Helen set about pushing the buttons that would transform the room into a bedroom. Tables slid from sight, twin beds appeared, the lights dimmed.

They undressed in the dimness, without conversation, as they had these many years. It was as though they were separated by miles instead of only

a few feet, each unaware of the other's presence.

"I'm going to grab a fast shower," he told her and headed for the shower stall. He heard her answering murmur, as he closed the door of the airtight cubicle. Fingers ran over the dials, and invisible rays caressed his naked body, cleansing it of impurities with swift silent radiation.

When he stepped once more into the main room, Helen was lying unmoving on her bed. The television set was blank, and an almost inaudible hypnotic hum came from it, soothing, compelling, lulling. He sat on the edge of the bed, listening in fascination to the sound. Slowly, it faded, slowly, slowly . . .

He caught himself starting to doze, and he sat upright on the bed straining to hear the evasive hum. He shook his head violently to clear it. He wondered how many persons were aware that the noise was actually a high-frequency voice-recording which in effect hypnotized persons into sleep, and then instilled into each one's subconsciousness a faith in the glories of the government. Yet even when you knew, it was difficult to resist.

Stealthily, he rose and dressed again in dark silence. He then made his way across the room to the shower stall, entered,

closed the door securely. A manipulation of the dials, a soft pressure on a portion of one wall, and a section slid back to reveal a radio apparatus.

Arthur put the microphone to his lips, spoke swiftly into it, making contact. A furtive voice, crackled and staticky answered in code. Arthur gave his part of the ritual.

"Right," the voice said, relaxing a bit. "Everything okay?"

"Simply great," Arthur said, putting a smile into the phrase. It was good to hear George Keating's voice again. "How's everything up there?"

"Not bad. Nobody suspects anything as far as we know. Shipments are getting a bit slow, but I expect they'll be heavier before long. Ready to spring it?"

"Yes," Arthur said. "Oh, one thing though," frowning, "the underground suspects there's a WBI man in my unit."

"Anything further? Have they narrowed him down at all."

"I don't think so. I'm going to a meeting tonight; I managed to talk Julie into it. If I can, I'll contact you later."

"Right-o."

Arthur closed the circuit and sealed the wall again, turning the dials to a random location. He opened the door of the cubicle and peered cautiously into the

gloom. He thought he detected a furtive movement, but it was only Helen turning on the bed.

He crossed the room, noiselessly ascended to the roof and leaped outward. Blades unfolded to churn the darkness. It was a Stallman Rotor—their commercials seemed the least offensive—and it deposited him gently beside his house; just as gently as any Ronson would have done.

Ahead of him, the stars glittered frostily in the night. He breathed the crystal air in great intakes of breath, trying not to remember it was taxed. Lines from Walter Scott leaped unaccountably to his mind: "Breathes there a man," he thought, "with soul so dead, who never to himself hath said, 'This is my own, my native land.'" He felt the last word could be justly changed to "air" to fit this overtaxed era in which he lived.

The moon was out, and he stopped to stare at it. Across its surface, in letters of fire, were the words: "Buy Air Bonds, A Solid Investment." There was little practical need for the ad; pay deductions were arbitrary. Shaking his head sadly, Arthur Dunlop walked into the night.

Night beckoned, and Arthur Dunlop followed its call. He went willfully, but he could not have resisted had he wanted to. The

streets were dark, lit only by the moon and the stars, and houses were dark phantoms rising in the night, their owners lulled to sleep by the omnipresent television receivers. But he tried not to think of that. He thought of the cool velvet evening which lay before him, and of the girl who waited quietly in the shadows of a deserted park.

He thought of that as he walked into the night, and he thought also of things more serious, and suddenly—

—a voice cried: "Stop!" It was a mechanical voice, tinny, without emotion. "It is the time of curfew. You are not allowed out. Your name?"

Arthur stood, petrified, and stared at a black robot face before him. He heard a click, loud in the darkness, and knew that his picture had been taken.

The sound jarred him from his immobility, and he turned and scampered into the darkness.

"Stop," the robot commanded, "Stop!" and a shaft of light darted from its forehead, piercing the darkness, shriveling grass beneath Arthur's feet. But the ray missed him, and he darted down the street, amid the pounding echoes of his flight.

After several blocks, he threw himself panting into a doorway and looked back down the street. Nothing. Silence and moonlight

and darkness, and only his own labored breathing while his chest rose and fell in unaccustomed gasps.

But they had his picture! In seconds, a giant machine could find a similar picture in its files, complete with every detail of information concerning him. They might get him before the work was complete. If he could only evade them until he could turn this to advantage. He felt in his pocket for the radioactive silver disc he knew was there.

Down the street, a shadow moved, and he held his breath. In a shaft of moonlight, black metal glinted darkly. With a muffled cry he slipped from the doorway and flew down the street, trying to still the noise he made. Behind him, no sounds came to indicate pursuit.

He darted across the street, went into an alley, crossed another street. Finally, he came to the park. He stopped. Fearfully, he looked behind him. No one. He walked forward.

The park was a mass of tree and shadow, indistinguishable. Softly, he called, "Julie." No answer. "Julie."

A gentle movement, and someone disengaged from the shadows, glided to him. Someone soft and warm—and feminine. He could smell the elusive taint of

her perfume even before she entered his arms.

"You're late," she said.

"I was detained."

She looked sharply at him. "Trouble?"

"I—I don't know. A robot surprised me. He took my picture."

"A robot!" she said in alarm, drawing away from him. "They probably already know who you are. Were you followed?"

"Part of the way, but I think I dropped him."

"You *think*?" Her tone was worried. "Do you realize you might have led him here. We can't go to the meeting place now. They'll be searching for you."

"And they'll find me if I stay here," he said mournfully. "Now, you've got to take me, Julie. I've got to go someplace."

"Where?" she said. "Where can anyone go—except up there? With a motion of her head she indicated the moon, hanging like a grim reminder of the Prison Colony it contained. She shook her head. "I should've suspected it when that WBI man showed up. Somehow they've gotten wise to you. Do you realize you've jeopardized our entire position?"

"I didn't mean to—"

"It matters very little whether or not you meant to," Julie said sharply; "the fact is, you've

done it." Her tone softened, "I'm sorry, Arthur, it's just that—"

"I understand how you feel," Arthur said gently, taking her in his arms. "Believe me, Julie, everything will turn out all right."

"I hope so," Julie said, "Well, we have to do something; we can't stay here."

"Take me to the hiding place, Julie," he begged; "we can work out something from there."

She looked at him briefly, considering the alternatives, her mind torn between affection for him and fear for the underground's safety. He knew she was recalling the many plans they had made for when all this was over, the legal matter of Helen, their home in a world where the air was free.

"If I stay here they will get me," he reasoned. "At least we have a chance the other way—if we hurry!"

In sudden determination, she said, "Come on, then."

She took him by the hand and led him deeper into the park. During the year he had been an unofficial member of the underground, supplying them with blueprints, he had never seen their headquarters, but he suspected it was close by, right under the noses of the authorities, and Julie did not disappoint him. She led him to a stone-

block monument commemorating heroes of the Last War, and effortlessly pushed aside one of the blocks to reveal the darkness of a tunnel.

"Follow me," she directed and disappeared.

Arthur did, but first he dropped the silver disc a few feet away. When they were in the tunnel, Julie closed the entrance again and produced a flashlight. By its beams, they made their way downward.

They walked for perhaps a half-mile, when the tunnel broadened into what seemed a cavern. Their footsteps echoed from the opposite wall with a click-click-click, click-click-click.

"The old subway," Julie explained, her voice hollow, and Arthur nodded. With the coming of the helibus system many years ago, the subways had been discarded and their entrances sealed and checked periodically. Of course, they couldn't know about the monument entrance. At least, they hadn't, Arthur amended, thinking of the silver disc whose emanations could now be easily picked up by the robots.

"Here we are," Julie said, after awhile, coming to a halt before a door. She tapped carefully with the flashlight according to a prearranged signal. The door slid open slightly, emitting a finger of light from the room's

glowtube. A man's face appeared to survey the corridor briefly, then the door went wide.

They entered a large room and the door slid into place behind them. Arthur strained his eyes, blinded temporarily by the light. Unfamiliar faces stared at him, about twenty of them. Men and women of all ages. He started suddenly. There, grinning pleasantly at him, was Austen, the young fellow from the office.

"Are we all here?" Julie wanted to know.

"Yes, we were waiting for you," a voice said.

Arthur whirled. "You?"

"Everything okay, Dunlop?" Samson asked, smiling.

"Simply great," he answered, a little weakly.

"What kept you?" Samson asked Julie.

"He was delayed by a robot."

"What?"

Austen was at the door, frowning: "I thought I heard a noise." His voice was a whisper.

Samson pulled out a gun. He glared at Dunlop. "If they followed you—"

The door gave way with a sudden blast that threw them all to the floor. In the smoking entrance a robot appeared. With an effort, Samson forced himself erect and leveled his blaster.

Before he could fire, Arthur leaped at the man, wrenched the

weapon from his fingers. Then the robot was in the room, then another, and another, their forehead-rays ready for instant use. There was no escape.

"Arthur!" Julie cried hoarsely.

"*There's* your WBI man," Samson accused.

Arthur smiled crookedly and held on to the blaster in his hand. He did not look at Julie, for there was silent contempt and shame in her eyes.

The trial was short and simple, for justice had ceased to be a complicated thing and was governed by facts considered in the light of pre-established premises. To offset any possibility of human error, a great machine unemotionally sifted and weighed facts presented to it and arrived at a decision. Either those accused were guilty or they were not guilty, and obviously they were, so the trial itself and Arthur's testimony were matters of formality. The prisoners were, of course, duly convicted and sentenced to life on the Lunar Prison Colony, where life was runored to be not long.

However, an unexpected development arose. The Court, it seems, had fed also into the machine various newly discovered facts concerning Arthur Dunlop, and the machine, with a figurative eye prefocused on

State security, had arrived at a further pronouncement.

"You are to be commended," the Court said, as spokesman for the machine, "for your excellent work as a member of the World Bureau of Investigation. However, there is a little matter of a radio set concealed in your home—"

Arthur's face went white. Helen, he thought. That movement in the darkness—she hadn't been asleep! Of course. She was loyal to the cause, even to the extent of betraying her husband; perhaps she even suspected about Julie. He almost laughed aloud.

"But that was for emergency use," he pleaded, knowing it would do no good, "to contact the WBI when necessary."

"That may be," the Court conceded. "However, it was unauthorized, and it is even possible that its use might be harmful to the State. Until we can investigate further, you will be sentenced to a temporary term of one year on the Lunar Prison Colony, after which your case will be automatically up for review. I understand you applied for Lunar duty. This will give you an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with conditions firsthand."

The Court's gavel fell, an archaic but effective symbol of the passing of judgment. He did

not look at the other prisoners who sat gloating nearby, even in the losing of their cause. Strange, Arthur Dunlop thought almost unemotionally, the way things had turned out . . .

The Lunar Prison ship came down out of the sky like a gray-metal coffin, settling with infinite slowness to the dock where the prisoners waited silently. The airlock opened and a gangplank stretched its finger towards them. A blond uniformed man strode from the ship, his Captain's bars glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

The Earthguard came forward, holding out a list of names. "Some additions to your labor camp, my dear Captain," he said jovially.

"And welcome they'll be," the Captain said, an indefinable glint in his eyes. "We have a lot of work to accomplish up there."

"So I've heard," the guard said.

The Captain smiled. "You haven't heard the half of it," he said, winking, and the guard guffawed.

"All right, all right," Samson growled irritably. "If we're going, let's go."

"Patience, friend," the blond Captain admonished. "Right this way now, that's right, through the airlock, take your seats as

I call them off. Dunlop, one; Samson, two; Austen, three . . ."

Arthur fled silently into the spaceship, Samson and Julie and the others behind him. He took a seat and looked around.

He cried out at what he saw, and then Samson's hands, were upon his neck, squeezing with the fury of a man possessed by one thought. He felt his breath being cut off, the room darken. They fell into the aisle. He could hear shouts of vengeance around him, and he thought he heard Julie's frantic voice telling them to stop. Julie—

The airlock clanged with awful finality, and there was a sickening rush as the spaceship darted aloft. Uncushioned bodies flew, and Arthur felt the pressure on his throat ease.

He blinked open his eyes, forced himself erect. The blond Captain was bending over him. "You okay?"

"Still alive, George," he said, massaging his throat, "but I think we'd better tell them before I need a new head."

"George?" Julie said, puzzled. "You two know each other?"

"We were in the war together," the Captain said.

Arthur rose unsteadily. "I'd like you people to meet my best friend, George Keating."

"But—"

"We decided some time ago

that Earth is no place for an underground movement," Arthur said. "There's too much secrecy, too much danger involved in the slightest movement away from the established pattern. People are too involved with the Super State idea and the dangers to their own particular skins." Like my wife, Helen, he thought to himself.

"There's one place, though," George Keating supplied, "where the inhabitants are in perfect accord with overthrowing the government as it now exists."

"Where?" Samson asked skeptically.

"Where else," Arthur told him, smiling, "but the Moon, on the prison colony where people were sent because they didn't like the way things were turning out politically and otherwise on Earth. It was a comparatively simple matter to replace the guards with our own group."

"Then," Julie exclaimed, "then you were in on this all the time. It was part of a plan."

Arthur nodded. "All except Helen's turning me in, which was unexpected but just as well I suppose. We're almost ready for the ultimatum, and we wanted this group to aid us, which is why I betrayed you. We could have whisked you away secretly, but there was greater danger in that and the disappearance of an

individual, much less a group, couldn't go unnoticed in that society. Besides, this way they'll be more complacent."

"As I told that guard," Keating added, "we've still got a lot of work to do, chiefly on the other side of the Moon where Earth can't see—put the finishing touches on spaceships we've been building, assemble the weapons and the guided missiles. A lot of work. We may not have to use them—I hope we don't—but they'll be ready, just in case."

Samson wet his lips. "It's a big project," he said testily.

"Of course," Arthur admitted, smiling. He indicated a porthole. "But look at Earth down there."

They crowded to see. It was a large green ball, glowing iridescently, becoming smaller as they approached the prison colony that was not a prison colony. Julie shrank into Arthur's arms.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Austen said, "Why, it looks fragile, like you could reach out from here and—and smash it." There was awe and wonder in his voice.

"You can," Keating said, "if necessary." His eyes narrowed. "It's a perfect target, a sitting duck from the sky. Who owns the Moon controls Earth."

"I'd like to apologize," Samson said, offering his outstretched hand to Arthur.

"Me, too," Julie said.

"I'll accept both apologies," Arthur Dunlop said, "but from you, Julie, I won't settle for a handshake."

Julie took the hint.

"We have a lot of time yet, so we may as well all relax," Keating announced. "Arthur and I can brief you on the situation

as it stands." He grinned. "If he ever comes up for air!"

They laughed the laughter of free men and gazed through the porthole at their destination. The bright face of the Moon floated towards them. Behind them, the Earth hung at peace—unsuspecting that anything had changed.

By the convention of most magazines, we should be taking this space to tell you the names of the stories to appear in our next issue. In all honesty, though, this seems like a somewhat pointless idea. Since most writers turn out various types of stories in varying degrees of excellence, a list of names means very little; and titles don't mean anything by themselves. We've noticed that readers usually select their favorite magazine, rather than their favorite line-up of titles and authors.

There's another reason why you won't find any specific details here on the next issue: the need for such an announcement tends to make an editor buy for name and trick idea, rather than for sound stories. We'd rather have complete freedom, and simply depend on giving you stories selected for reading, not for advance listing.

Incidentally, you may have noticed we've been bringing stories by men who are usually found in other fields. H. A. de Rosso, of our first issue, is a top Western writer. Algis Budrys is making a name in science fiction, but not usually doing space opera, which we frankly want. And along that line, we've been planning on using work by Kenneth Wright, whose chief work has previously been in the hard-cover field. We don't care how reputations are made, or whether the writer has a known reputation, if the stories are good. Such familiar names as George O. Smith, Poul Anderson, Milton Lesser will continue to appear, just as comparatively new writers such as Ben Smith and Charles Fritch will continue to be welcome.

But if you really want to know what will be in the next issue, there's one way to be sure of discovering this. Just pick it up at your newsstand when it appears and study the table of contents. We're confident you'll take it home with you then—and that you'll be glad you did.

TO THE SONS OF TOMORROW

BY IRVING COX, JR.

ILLUSTRATED BY BEECHAM

The *Olympus* could never return to her home planet; her crew was destined to live out their lives among the savages of this new planet. But savages could be weaned from their superstitions and set on the road to knowledge, Theusaman thought. Or could they?

Baiel had always shown me the degree of respect prescribed in the Space Code. Aboard the *Olympus* we clashed only once, and that was when I ordered the emergency landing.

"You've no right to risk it, Captain Theusaman," he protested.

"We can't do anything else," I answered. "We're ninety-three million light years away from the Earth, and twenty-five outside the patrol area."

"Sir, this star sector is totally new to us!" Baiel was standing by the control panel, a tall, thin man in his early thirties. His face was hollowly angular, sun-bronzed and capped with a brush of thick, black hair. He looked away from the sight dome and

I saw bitterness and anger blazing in his blue eyes. "This is an exploratory expedition, Captain Theusaman. We were sent out to record the conditions beyond the periphery of the Earth charts, and it's vitally important for us to return with the data."

"I'm aware of that, Baiel."

"Then face the facts. We've blown our dorsal tubes and lost our emergency fuel. Unless we restock with fissionable material, we've no chance of getting back to Earth. You believe we can restock on that unknown planet out there, but—"

"I know we can. I've seen the spectroanalysis; it doesn't lie."

"Not in the statement of data. But—with the best of intentions—a man can lie in the general-



ization he draws from the data. The spectroanalysis tells us that planet out there has an atmosphere like ours. It tells us there's an abundance of fissionable material in the mineral chemistry. But suppose it can't be recovered with any of the machines we have aboard? If we land, we'll have no chance of rising again."

"It's a necessary risk."

"No, Captain Theusaman! We have almost enough energy in our functioning tubes to reach the outer fringe of the patrol area. From there we'd be close enough to beam an emergency call back to Earth. One of the patrols might pick it up in time to—"

"Might," I snapped. "I'm glad you recognize that as a possibility, Baiel."

"Even if none of us survives, our data will still be there; sooner or later an Earth ship would find the *Olympus*."

"You risk more than I do, Baiel."

"But our information would be saved for the scientific processors."

"I prefer to save the men. We know they can live on that planet, even if we find no fissionable material. The issue is settled."

"There's one other consideration, Captain Theusaman. With our dorsal tubes gone, we can't

maneuver. Even you can understand, sir, that a crash-landing—"

"I've given the orders, Baiel. Will you execute them, or must I have you cabinized for insubordination?"

"Very well, sir."

He departed without saluting.

Baiel was right, on both counts. I knew there was a chance he might be. Yet I had made emergency landings before. Nothing had ever gone wrong.

This time it did. As soon as we nosed into the stratosphere we were in trouble. The *Olympus* angled down too sharply. The gyrometers failed, since they were engineered to make use of the compensating drive from the dorsal tubes. I tried to bring the ship up into the freedom of space again, but the best I could manage was a slow, corkscrew dive toward the unknown planet.

As we spun through the cloud wreath, I studied the globe carefully. Within limits, I could still select the place where I wanted to land. The planet was capped at both poles by gleaming ice fields which spread down over the sphere like giant hands. Only a narrow equatorial band was free of ice. The landing site I chose was a wooded area at the edge of the glacier. The nearby ridge of jagged mountains suggested volcanic action, and the

possible presence of the fissionable metals we wanted.

We crash-landed at the base of the glacier, skipping over the ragged ice until the bow caught and shattered in a deep ice gorge. The safety stabilizers functioned in all the cabins that were not pierced by ice. Our heaviest casualties were among the tube-room crew and the astrographers. Only one of the scientists survived. I ordered station formation on the frozen meadow outside the ship. Baiel bawled out the roster, while I ticked off the names of the survivors: forty crewmen, none seriously wounded; one scientist, fatally hurt; and fifteen of the female staff of astrographical clerks. Counting Baiel and myself, we numbered fifty-eight.

As the last of the names was read off, we stood for a moment shivering in the icy wind. Slowly Baiel looked up from the ship's roll and let his blue eyes move along the buckled hulk of the *Olympus*. Then he glanced at me, and the set of his jaw was as coldly emotionless as the ice bank behind him.

"Have you any further orders to give, Captain Theusaman?" His tone was frankly insolent. I clenched my fists, but checked the response I might have made. Baiel and I were the only Space Officers with the expedition; any

difference between us would be disastrous.

"Turn all hands into the stern cabins," I said, "and break out the landing gear. It'll keep us warm. Detail five men to check on the damage, and have them report to me."

An hour later Baiel and I stood at the control panel reading through the list of damages. Remarkably little had happened—nothing, at least, that we could not repair with material we had at hand. We organized all survivors into repair crews of five each; even the women were given assignments.

Baiel and I made preliminary soil tests for fissionable metals. The computer prognosis from such highly selective data is never infallible, but the probable degree of error is no more than .0006. Over a period of two hours we made five tests, with the same results. There was fissionable matter on the planet—no doubt of that—but it was locked in a chemical combination we could not release without building a giant separation plant such as we used on Earth.

"Our data is too limited if we sample so close to the ship," I told Baiel.

"Possibly." There was a long pause before he added the prescribed, "sir."

I nodded toward the hill sloping away from the glacier toward a forest of tangled pines. "We'll make another test down there." With a shrug, Baiel followed after me obediently.

Three miles from the *Olympus*, in a thick grove of trees, we found the man. Naked, he lay bound over a heap of boulders, his dead eyes staring up at the sky. A gash had been torn in his chest and his blood had spilled out over chunks of glacial ice arranged in a crude pyramid beside him.

To both of us, the sight of a man and the thing it implied was vaguely terrifying. For almost five centuries expeditions of Earthmen had explored the skies, slowly reaching beyond our own solar system toward the stars. Where the atmosphere was hospitable, we had built thriving colonies. But nowhere had we found a race of people like ourselves. The planets had been so consistently untenanted that we had grown to expect nothing else.

Now here, on this unknown world, twenty-five million light years beyond the periphery of the Earth patrols—here we found men, men like ourselves!

Baiel cut the thongs and lifted the rigid body off the pile of rock. "If you don't mind, Captain," he said, "I'd like to ex-

amine—this—up in the ship lab. Since there's a chance—just a chance, sir"—His sarcasm was unmistakable, "—that we'll be staying here, I want to know what we're up against."

Late that night, while the rest of the expedition slept, Baiel and I carried the body into the laboratory. Baiel performed a thoroughgoing, workman-like autopsy. It was impossible not to admire his efficiency and skill. We were momentarily united in the rising excitement of mutual curiosity.

"There's a fascinating structural similarity to our own," Baiel pointed out. "Identical organs; identical blood composition. All the differences are minor—a smaller brain case, with a retreating forehead, and pronounced orbital ridges. And look at those teeth and the chinless jaw!"

"In a way, it suggests Bonn's Hypothesis," I said.

"Aubrey Bonn? Why, he's the laughing stock of the Anthropological Academy. We've never found a whisper of evidence to suggest a basis for his Hypothesis."

"How could we? There have never been any people on any of the planets we've explored."

Baiel dropped his scalpel and stepped back from the table, kneading his chin thoughtfully.

"Bonn said that an identical chemistry and atmosphere, plus identical time phase, would produce an identical chronology of the species. This planet may do that. It should have been obvious when we had the negative tests for fissionable material. The Earth itself is the only planetary body we know where we've had to build separation plants to recover the metal."

"But, according to Bonn's Hypothesis, the resemblance should be exact." With disgust, I glanced at the torn corpse on the table. "None of us has an idiot's skull like that."

"We may have had once, Captain. You're forgetting the time phase. This planet is the Earth as it was millennia in the past, in the age of the great glaciers. The ice cap here has obviously reached its maximum penetration. It will begin to recede now, decade by decade, and civilization will slowly take root where now there is nothing but primitive savagery."

"Civilization, out of that brain, Baiel?"

He smiled at the ape-face of the corpse. "Not that, but the one that comes after. Perhaps the new man will evolve, Captain." Baiel licked his lips thoughtfully. "Or perhaps he will be created."

"I don't think I quite follow—"

"Created by the gods!" Laughing, Baiel ripped off his laboratory jacket and flung it over the corpse. "I think, Captain, that we shouldn't tell the others about him quite yet. You and I have some investigating to do first."

The next morning Baiel called me into the control room. When the door was shut, he turned up the viewscreen. By adjusting the angle of the beam, he had focused the projection upon the *Olympus* and the frozen terrain surrounding the ship in a ten mile radius.

The ship lay on a tilted, empty meadow above a forest of pines. Five miles away a limestone cliff rose out of the forest. A crude, semicircular clearing was beneath the cliff and on it we saw a tribe of men and women gathered around a fire built at the mouth of a cave. Baiel turned up a section enlargement and we studied the men carefully. There was no doubt that they were the counterparts of the corpse lying in the laboratory of the *Olympus*.

That same morning Baiel and I made our first visit to the village. Fortunately we went armed, for they received us with violent hostility, attempting to drive us away with a volley of spears.

A peculiar greeting from a people we now understand to be cordial and open in their friendship! But their motivation was entirely logical. Faced by a diminishing source of food, the tribe saw every stranger as a potential threat to tribal survival.

Baiel and I used our Haydens to curb their belligerence. The sight of red flame blasting their spears into dust awed them into a sullen kind of submission. But it was not until our second visit, when we took them a gift of bear meat, that we began to make any progress in communication.

We watched curiously while the tribe wolfed the meat, crudely searing it over an open fire. As hungry as they obviously were, each of them nonetheless set aside a liberal portion which was later taken to a grizzled old man who never moved from the mouth of the cave. In response to our gestures, they made it clear to us that the old man was their equivalent of high priest. He apparently commanded the wind and the sun, and he had some sort of a terrifying blood relationship with the glacier.

Comfortably fed, the tribe became cordial. Baiel and I had found a touchstone. Whenever we visited the village after that,

we always took them food. In less than a week we knew their dialect. It was a very small vocabulary, built chiefly of denotative symbols. Baiel concentrated his attention upon the high priest; I stayed with the tribal Chief.

It was a tactical error on my part, since Baiel already knew what he intended to do. I did not. I wasn't aware, then, that the conflict between us had already begun.

As our degree of communication improved, the various members of the tribe shyly began to express curiosity about us. Our Haydens aroused no interest, except for a vague and superstitious awe. The mechanism of the weapon was entirely beyond their comprehension; they wrote it off as a kind of magic closely allied to the mysteries practiced by their priest. Our garments were of greater significance. The tribe was irresistibly drawn to caress the sleek material, to hold it against their cheeks and chatter excitedly over its unexpected warmth.

Once, as we sat in a circle around the fire, the Chief asked me the name of our tribe.

"We are Earthmen."

"The Earth tribe? I do not know it."

"It is not a tribe, but a place."

I picked up a handful of soil. "This is earth to you—everything that you see around you. We came from another place like this, a place in the sky."

They stared at me blankly. Then one of the young hunters scooped up soil, as I had, and said brightly, "Earth: Yes, your name for the hunting ground. Earth! It is a good name."

"No. We are Earthmen!"

"Yes, Earthmen—all of us. Not beasts that howl by night and haunt the forest trails. Men. We are men. But also we have a tribe."

I tried to make my explanation more explicit. "We came here in a sky carrier which is named the *Olympus*. It rests now up by the great ice wall. There are others like us, too, who may—" I stopped, because one by one they were rising and moving away from me.

"You are wrong!" the Chief cried. "Your tribe cannot live by the glacier, on the tabooed ground!"

As he mentioned the name, it threw the whole tribe into a panic. Nothing I could say would undo their rising fear. They shrank from me, running into the dark recesses of the cave. Eventually the high priest—with Baiel standing beside him—restored order by crying shrill prayers up at his brother, the

glacier. Fortunately, the harm I had done did not seem to call for the drastic remedy of human sacrifice.

After the tumult had passed, the Chief said to me, "It was a cruel thing to say, Seus-man." (The tribe always had trouble pronouncing my name; sometimes they would drop whole syllables from it.)

"On my word, it was not meant so," I replied. After a silence, I asked cautiously, "Suppose it had been true?"

"It may not be. The brother glacier is a great threat to us all. He is not a friend. In my time and in the time of my father before me, the ice has always moved closer to us, everywhere destroying more and more of our hunting ground."

"Can your people not move away from it, into better land?"

"We have, as far as we dare. Beyond the forest the ground is taboo. There the sun god strikes fire from the mountain tops, to warn us away from his domain."

"Is there no land on the other side of the fire mountains?"

"The hunting ground of the dead. It is not for us, the living."

When Baiel and I returned at dusk to the *Olympus*, I walked thoughtfully through the swirling snow, saying very little. For the first time I faced, without

regret, the fact that we were doomed to live out our lives on this frozen, nameless world. I had found a purpose, and it seemed good.

This friendly, impoverished tribe was man himself, as he had been on the Earth in the remote darkness of our own uncharted past—man, clinging precariously to a hard-won savagery, plagued by ice and wind, threatened by a vanishing supply of food.

To the nearly insurmountable problems set by nature, this tribe had added one final prison of their own creation, the taboos and superstitions that penned them fast on the brink of the glacier. As things stood, the tribe would not survive. To become men as we were, they had to be freed of the weight of the gods, freed of superstition so they could deal with the facts of reality. With our help the tribe might eventually learn how to create a civilization. Without it, they were doomed.

Hesitantly I explained myself to Baiel.

"Of course," he said. "It's obvious. We can't allow nature to forget the proper chronology of the species, can we?"

"It will be slow work, but—"

"But not impossible. Their life span averages less than thirty years; ours exceeds a century. That's time enough."

He agreed with me at once and, I think, he was entirely sincere. We were simply using the same words to express two totally opposed ideas. Neither of us, I'm sure, was aware of the ambiguity.

The need for decision came immediately. That night the power failed in the *Olympus* and the winter cold settled slowly into the cabins. The residue of fuel energy left in the tanks was not enough to power the heating grids, and our portable solar heaters were ineffectual in the cavernous space of our cabins. Our food tanks froze over; the producing cultures died. Baiel and I built an open furnace in the control room, and the expedition crowded there around the fire.

Baiel and I had already told them about the primitive village; the expedition had learned the tribal tongue as we brought the knowledge back to the *Olympus*. Now, for the first time, I told them frankly that we were never going to leave the planet. Hand-picked, psycho-processed personnel, the expedition adjusted readily to the new reality. Without the benefits of the machines of our earthly civilization, we were faced with extreme hardships on such an unfriendly world. Our only sound course

was to join the village tribe and survive through mutual efforts.

The following morning I went to the Chief to propose the merger. He refused until I offered to guarantee a food supply for both groups. It was a safe enough promise. We had the Haydens and enough energized rounds to kill anything that walked the forest, for at least a year or more. I counted heavily on the fact that, within that period, we would be able to unhinge the paralyzing weight of tribal gods and taboos. The tribe could then be encouraged to migrate into a more fertile area.

The business of negotiation was concluded in less than an hour. But the elaborate ceremony of union lasted for two days. It was not a frequent occurrence, and yet tribes had occasionally united in the past. There was, therefore, a rigid body of custom proscribing the form; it was interpreted entirely by the priest.

Since I symbolized the chief of the incoming tribe, I was expected to spend the first night in the village alone, while the rest of the expedition shivered around the improvised fire in the *Olympus*. The Chief sealed me in tribal brotherhood by the gift of his daughter. Dayhan was shy, filthy, repulsive with the stench of the animal skins

she wore. Lice ran in her matted hair and grime streaked her cheeks. She smiled at me with an idiot's grin.

Yet I went willingly with Dayhan to the dark recess of the cave, which was traditionally reserved to the new wedded. It was painfully obvious that the success of my negotiations depended upon our mating. I stomached my revulsion in silence. In the morning, when Dayhan first addressed me publicly as "My Lord," the tribe was satisfied.

Throughout the day the ceremony became general, climaxed by the symbolic mingling of blood. To satisfy custom, each member of the expedition—except for the women—was paired with a tribesman of equal status. Curiously, they seemed to accept Baiel as our high priest. With decided misgiving, I watched while he complacently established himself in the priest's portion of the cave.

At sundown the ceremony ended. The old priest mounted a granite pedestal erected near the fire. Raising his long arms to the sky, he screamed guttural syllables at the gathering darkness. As the sun tinged the distant glacial wall with scarlet, the priest looked down upon the throng and proclaimed the need for sacrifice to brother glacier.

The members of our expedition reacted with shocked silence, but the primitive tribe matter-of-factly went through the deadly lottery. The chosen hunter moved out toward the sacrificial grove, followed by the priest who held his blade naked in his hand.

I cried reason at them, to hold them back. But the tribe neither heard nor comprehended. With glazing eyes they were lost in the terrifying ecstasy of tradition. Satisfy brother glacier, and the village would be safe.

At the grove Baiel suddenly joined the priest. They whispered together for a moment. Then Baiel raised his arms and spoke.

"Wait! We bring the tribe the new gods of the sun. Our gods are stronger than brother glacier. Let them speak to the ice, and no life need be given."

"Let the new gods satisfy the old!" the tribal priest echoed.

His statement gave Baiel's innovation the stamp of approval. The tribe began to chant a sing-song thanksgiving. Baiel, like the priest, raised his arms and shouted gibberish which they took as prayer. When he lowered his hand, he pointed at the pile of rock in the grove. Red flame flashed. The stones dissolved. The surrounding ice wasted into a pool of water,

slowly seeping into the blackened earth.

It was a simple enough trick. Baiel had concealed a Hayden in his sleeve. But it impressed the tribe. They sang their exaltation, clapping hands on the broad shoulders of the young hunter who had been spared.

Baiel joined me as we walked back to the village.

"I knew something had to be done, Captain Theusaman," he explained. "Fortunately, my idea worked."

"It's wrong, Baiel; all wrong."

"I saved the man, didn't I?"

"By substituting new gods for theirs. We want to free them, Baiel."

"Is there any other way to do it?"

"By teaching them the truth. By destroying their burden of gods and superstitions—not by creating more."

This amused him and he laughed. I thought his reaction was odd, but I still misinterpreted it.

For the next two months I became more and more involved in helping the tribe find its way toward civilization. We could not impose anything remotely like our Earth culture. The answer to the problem, without the technique for reaching the solution, would be meaningless. But in small things, like the brief

spring thaws that slowly ate away their planet-capping glacier, we could erode and destroy their shell of savagery.

Because of its application to my own situation with Dayhan, the first teaching I undertook was cleanliness. On the Earth it is an old joke that, when we build, we plan the bathing facilities first; our space ships are notably awkward to maneuver because we include so many elaborate baths. To us, filth equates with savagery. Cleanliness was a concept which the tribe quickly adopted and understood, because the reward was both visible and immediate.

We erected stone culverts above the fire, melting chunks of ice and channeling the warm water into a stone pool built inside the cave. Following the example set by the expedition, the tribe shortly took to daily bathing as a matter of course. We taught them to scrape the filth from their skins, to comb the lice out of their hair.

I was amazed—and enormously pleased—with the physical change a bath brought in Dayhan. Her stringy hair took on a golden luster. Her dirty skin softened and color came slowly into her yellow cheeks. The running sores dried, caked, and disappeared. Instinctively she came to be aware of her potential

loveliness. She began to experiment with braiding her hair in various ways over her slanting skull. Once I found her trying sprigs of greenery in the knot and studying the effect in her reflection in the bathing pool.

The cave was always warm, particularly when the wind and snow howled through the village; but it was uncomfortably crowded. Because the fire was built at the mouth of the cave, the oxygen inside was inadequate. We never slept through a night without feeling a nagging nausea from the foul air we breathed.

Therefore, as soon as the tribe understood how the stone culvert had been built, we proposed building stone cabins. So rapidly had they learned that most of the labor was performed by the tribe. The Earth people merely advised and suggested. And we did very little of that, allowing them a great deal of trial and error experimentation.

It was the happiest time of our merger with the tribe. Everyone worked, and worked in unison. I had never made any explanation of my point of view to the other members of the expedition. I hadn't considered it necessary. No Earthman was certified for space travel unless he had first been successfully psycho-processed. In effect, that

meant that we took a scientific rather than an emotional view of any given set of data. Since each of us was faced with an identical pattern of facts, I assumed that each of us would approximate the same generalization.

- To a degree, that happened. We all realized the need to teach the tribe; no one proposed bringing machines from the *Olympus* to give the savages the products of our culture without their specifics. One by one members of the expedition followed my lead and mated with the women of the tribe.

Only our own women—the fifteen astrographical clerks—and half a dozen men held off. I failed to perceive the significance until it was too late. The six men were Baiel's closest friends; each of them had spent at least a year at the Academy, while the rest of us were Rankers, traditionally considered their inferiors. And the women, being clerks rather than crewmen, had not been psycho-processed.

The breach into factions came when our village of stone huts was completed. We were faced with the problem of heating. I wanted the solution to be worked out by the tribe without our help. Slowly they made progress in their efforts to discover how

to build fires within the huts without filling the rooms with smoke. They had just discovered how to pierce the roofs with chimneys when I awoke, one morning, to find that Baiel had presented them with a pat answer to the problem.

During the night he had stealthily returned to the *Olympus* with four of his men. They had brought back to the village a dozen solar heaters. Before I was awake, he had presented the heaters to the tribe as gifts of the sun god.

In wonder the tribe gathered around the tiny machines, holding out their hands to feel the mysterious warmth. Then they thronged at Baiel's feet as he stood on the rock pedestal above the village fire. They swayed and chanted their prayers which had once been reserved solely for the majesty of brother glacier.

As I approached, Baiel began to address them.

"The sun god sends you these because of your obedience to his ways. Through me—through Baiel, the high priest—he makes you promise of even greater gifts than this, if your faith continues."

The tribal chanting arose in ecstasy. The old priest knelt at Baiel's feet, offering up a chunk

of glacial ice in token of brother glacier's submission.

"There is one all-powerful god!" Baiel cried. "Only one. And I, Baiel, I am his priest."

"All-powerful; the only one," the villagers responded.

It was at that point that I intervened. The tribe stared at me in bewilderment. I took one of the heaters and dismantled it.

"This was made by men," I explained. "By men like yourselves. See, this is no more than a substance like the hard veins of metal you find in your rocks. In time you can learn to make these as we do."

For a quarter of an hour I talked, patiently repeating and demonstrating the facts. But still their eyes were glazed with bewilderment and the ghosts of hidden fears. Since they had no understanding of the processing of ore, how could I explain away the appearance of the supernatural? Even when I disassembled the machine, I proved nothing except that I was tinged with godhood myself.

Baiel stood smirking, saying nothing. When I turned on him in anger, he said quietly:

"Earthmen understand reason, Theusaman." It was the first time he had dropped my title, and he did so intentionally. "These animals—this amusing burlesque of real men—I'm

afraid you ask too much of them."

"I ask nothing but their right to survive and evolve, as we did."

"But they can't. Haven't you learned that yet?"

Still smiling, he slid off the pile of rock and went into the cave. I followed him. One by one, the members of the expedition gathered around us. Slowly fifteen women and six men grouped themselves behind Baiel. The rest of the Earthmen were with me. Baiel was outnumbered and most of his people were unarmed, but they faced us with a peculiarly firm kind of confidence.

"I think it's time we had an understanding," I said. "I'm still in command here, Baiel, and—"

"In command? Of a ship that will never fly again, and an expedition that can never return to Earth? In another ten years, Theusaman, the glacier will have moved over the *Olympus*. It will be ground into dust."

"That's hardly the point."

"It writes finale to the past. It means this planet is ours—it must be—whether we want it or not."

"Ours, and theirs, Baiel."

He threw back his head and laughed. "In the Academy, Theusaman, we're taught to face reality, not to romanticize it. This tribe is semi-human, if you

like; I'm charitable enough to grant that. But they aren't men, any more than the primitive species on the Earth were men. Observe the skull of your—your bride, if you will; observe the idiocy in her vacant eyes; observe—"

"This is man as he was, Baiel! You pointed that out to me yourself."

"On the contrary, I was simply discussing the Bonn Hypothesis. I never said I believed it. On the Earth, Theusaman, before true man appeared, nature created a number of semi-men—homo-failures, you might say. They weren't men; they grew to the limits of their physical potential, but they never achieved human rationality. At the end of the Earth's ice age, the continents were widely populated by the last of nature's failures. Then, abruptly—we've never known where he originated, or how—man himself came on the scene. Overnight he wiped out the half-men and took over the planet. Man has come here, now, Theusaman; these failures will survive only so long as we need them. At the moment, they constitute a convenient labor force. A handful of us can control them by controlling their gods."

I drew my Hayden. "As I said,

Baiel, I'm still in command of this expedition."

He shrugged. "You've out-Haydened me, naturally; any Ranker could. If I reach for mine, you'll burn me where I stand."

"I'm glad you understand that. Give me your weapons—you, Baiel, and all your followers. Make any excuse you like to the tribe. You'll never have an activated Hayden again, for hunting or any other purpose."

Without resistance, they allowed themselves to be disarmed. I pulled the charges on all their weapons and negativized them.

"You settle everything so smoothly," Baiel laughed. "Next, of course, you'll propose a—"

I cut him short. "All the expedition is here in the cave with us. They all understand the differences between Baiel's objectives and mine. The issue is clear enough for a vote." Slowly the hands went up. I counted twenty-two in Baiel's faction, more than thirty in my own.

"So typical!" Baiel snorted. "So much like an Earthman! The will of the majority—our universal cure-all for all things."

"You agree to abide by it, Baiel?"

His eyebrows arched in a mocking imitation of surprise. "Can an Earthman do anything else, Captain?"

"So that we won't have a repetition of this morning's episode," I said, "I'm giving this order: None of us will return to the *Olympus* again for any reason without my consent. If it is violated, I'll take disciplinary action under the terms of the Space Code."

There was a mutter of agreement, primarily from my faction, and the angry meeting broke up. Nothing had been settled, except the division of the expedition into two camps. We never worked together again in harmony. Since Baiel's group was unarmed, their greatest potential danger seemed to be gone; yet the village tension persisted.

Baiel could no longer use his Hayden to make a spectacular display of the power of the sun god; slowly the old priest began to reassert the cult of brother glacier. It seemed to me that Baiel encouraged the change; certainly he and the old priest became more intimate than before. I wanted to order an end to their close association, but my own faction was against it.

"Baiel's harmless," they told me again and again. "Don't ride him, Captain. Let this thing simmer down and we'll have them all on our side again."

Gradually I realized that the very existence of the *Olympus*

was a constant threat to the precarious stability of our community. There were still countless machines aboard which could be converted into further enervating gifts of the sun god. The *Olympus* had to be destroyed, and yet I had no means to accomplish it.

Built to withstand the extreme radiations of spatial sunlight unfiltered by any atmosphere, the metal of the hull was immune to the relatively low degree of heat generated by the Hayden. Only the converted energy used to fuel the tubes could be used for emergency welding if repairs had to be made away from our Earth bases. While there was still a residue sealed in the tanks, I knew it was not enough to liquidate even a part of the ship.

The alternative was to move the community to a place where it would be physically impractical to return to the *Olympus*. To the south the land would be more fertile in any case, the game more plentiful. To migrate had always been one of my goals for the tribe.

But, when I proposed migration, I came face to face with the strongest of their taboos. The volcanic mountains to the south were more terrifying than brother glacier, which moved inexorably closer with the pass-

ing years. No argument, no logic, no patient persuasion could weaken the force of the taboo. Even Dayhan, who had learned so much, refused to listen to me. Beyond the fire mountains lay the hunting ground of the dead; it was forever forbidden to the living.

Suddenly, one night, the sky to the south blazed orange-red as the slumbering volcano erupted. The ground trembled and we heard long crevices cracking through the glacial ice; a gray ash settled down from the sky, smearing the snow heaped around our stone huts.

The tribe flocked in terror to the old priest. Brother glacier, he told them, was angry because he had been neglected; brother glacier demanded sacrifices.

Baiel stood on the stone pedestal beside the priest, smirking helplessly. When he caught my eye, he pointed to his sleeve to show me that it was empty. Since I had negativized his Hayden, he could do nothing to prevent the orgy of human slaughter.

I climbed the pedestal and tried reason. For a moment it seemed that the tribe might listen. But the earth shook again and, panic stricken, they started their lottery. Even then I would not have resorted to Baiel's trick, if they had not chosen one

of the Earthmen for the sacrifice.

I made a display of the sun god's power; it worked, of course. The old priest responded as if he had been waiting for my cue, and swayed the mob with him. Then Baiel began to exhort them, crying that the quaking ground was a sign sent by his god, not brother glacier. I slid blindly back to my stone hut, sick with self-revulsion; I felt soiled with the same deception of which Baiel stood accused.

The next morning, while the ground still shook periodically, Baiel returned to the *Olympus*. It was whispered on all sides, from both his faction and my own.

I had to follow him. I had to know what he was up to. But the undercurrent of feeling ran so high, it seemed necessary to conceal my intention. I said I was going root-digging in the forest. According to custom, Dayhan went with me.

I had taught her a great deal, but not enough to overcome her fear of the tabooed ground. She was willing to wait for me at the edge of the forest, just outside the sacrificial grove, but I hated to leave her alone and relatively unprotected. With some misgiving, I gave her my Hayden.

"My Lord!" Dayhan's almond

eyes widened as she fingered the weapon. It was the first time I had allowed any of the tribe to touch an energized Hayden.

"Do you trust a woman's hand with the brother-of-the-sun?" she asked. "Can I hope to understand the bark of your great god?"

"It is only a weapon, like your spear or arrow."

"So my Lord has taught me."

"It will burn any animal that threatens you while you wait."

"As I have seen when you go hunting. I point this small end at the beast, and then call upon the sun god for—"

"No, Dayhan. Aim well and push the small handle. It is not a god that makes the power, but the skill of man. Do not change the nozzle dial, or you will blast the whole forest into flame."

"Enough sun-fire to burn the forest! Yet you say he is no god. I am truly your mate, my Lord, when you share such power with me."

I left the forest and walked across the ice-covered meadow toward the glacier. Three miles away, nestled like a black beetle at the foot of the ice wall, lay the smashed cylinder of the *Olympus*, already nearly covered with ice and snow. A thin ribbon of smoke curled up from the open furnace.

Baiel met me at the door of

the control room. Over his fraying officer's uniform he wore a clumsy cloak of animal skins, as I did myself. Particles of ice were frozen into his black beard, transforming it into a jutting blade of ebony. I was suddenly aware how much he had changed since our crash-landing. Always thin, he now appeared emaciated. His youth was gone. Only the blaze in his blue eyes remained the same—glittering, self-confident, determined. Denied the dress, the grooming, the daily ritual of shaving, both Baiel and I had become bearded, stoop-shouldered patriarchs, imposing hulks in our animal cloaks.

"I expected you would follow me," Baiel said.

"Why did you come?" For a moment, I felt a peculiar warmth and pity for him. "It's insubordination. I'll have to take disciplinary action when we go back."

"I'm only trying to help, Captain." The words seemed right, but the voice was mocking.

Baiel turned to the viewscreen and dialed the focus on the area of the planet south of the volcanic mountains. I saw rolling hills and rich forests, green plains watered by a network of streams; the land was a broad peninsula surrounded by the calm, blue water of an immense

sea. There was no indication of human inhabitants.

"I know you've been trying to encourage the tribe to move," Baiel explained. "I came up here to see if I could locate a place for us to migrate. This peninsula is ideal, Captain. It's far enough from the glacier for agriculture to be practical, and—"

"The problem isn't to find the place, Baiel, but to conquer their taboo against migration."

"But you can do that, Captain; just teach the little savages to reason the way men do. Nothing to it." He smiled, then, and held out his hand. "Face it, Captain Theusaman; admit you're wrong! Last night you had to call on the gods; you couldn't control them any other way. If the sun god orders a migration, we can have them on their way in two hours."

"So you're still trying to convince me that you're right."

"Of course; that's why I wanted you to follow me here. Would I have any other reason?"

His answer seemed too quick. I looked at him, frowning, but the smile on his face was unreadable.

"Tell me, Baiel: What did you really want on the *Olympus*?"

He shrugged. "I came to use the viewscreen."

"You risked discipline for something so foolish?"

"What else? I can't bring any of the machines back to the village; you would throw them out. I can't power the tubes and go back to Earth."

It was all so glibly logical; yet I knew he was lying. I moved toward him, snatching the fringe of his cloak in my clenching fists. "I'm asking once again, Baiel: What did you expect to find here?"

"My Lord! My Lord!"

Baiel and I both whirled toward the open cabin door. Dayhan was outside, slowly crossing the last fifty feet of icy meadow toward the ship. When Baiel saw her, the smile sagged on his lips and he sprang from the ship.

"You're on tabooed ground!" he cried. "Go back!"

"I have no fear." Her words were brave, but her voice was a choked whisper as she looked up at the towering undulations of the glacier glaring in the sun. "Where my Lord can go, I will follow. Brother glacier is no god. See! I defy him." She raised my Hayden and aimed it unsteadily at the wall of ice above the *Olympus*.

"No!" Baiel screamed. "The sun god will destroy you!"

Baiel was ten paces ahead of me. He reached her as she fired. He knocked the Hayden from her hand with such force that Day-

han was thrown sprawling on the slick ground.

Above us tons of ice, dislodged by the Hayden blast, broke and slid down the face of the glacier upon the *Olympus*, rocking the ship over on its side. Baiel flung up his hands in terror, but lowered them a moment later. Behind his facial mask of stark fear, I saw a strange expression of uneasy surprise and calculation.

I moved toward him, my fists doubled.

"Even when they begin to conquer the taboos," I cried, through clenched teeth, "you still try to prevent it!"

"No, Captain; you've got it wrong. I just wanted—you—you had no right to give her the Hayden." Baiel spoke in a hoarse, nervous whisper, backing away from me slowly.

"Dayhan's my wife."

"She's still a primitive animal."

I lunged at him. He turned and ran. I would have followed, but Dayhan began to call after me frantically. I returned to help her. The ground beneath her was stained red; a jagged blade of ice had ripped a deep gash in her leg.

With my knife I cut a strip from my fur jacket and wound it as a tourniquet above the pulsing wound. My fingers were

numb with cold. I worked slowly and awkwardly, but at last the bleeding ceased. Dayhan tried to stand, but she could not.

"Leave me here, my Lord," she whispered. "Brother glacier is angry; he wants my blood."

"It was simply an accident, Dayhan. The glacier had nothing to do with it."

"I trod on tabooed ground. I defied him."

"Man makes the taboos and the punishments and the sacrifices!"

"So you have said, my Lord, and yet—"

"I have taught you truth. You walked alone and without harm on tabooed ground. You must tell that to your people. The harm came to you after you found us, Dayhan—from Baiel. Only man is cruel to man, not the gods."

I pulled her arm around my shoulder and we began the slow, painful walk back to the village. We had to stop frequently to rest. Twice I loosed the tourniquet to permit the blood to circulate in her lower leg.

It was four hours before we reached the edge of the forest. There two of my men met us. They had begun to search the forest for me when Baiel returned to the village alone. We improvised a stretcher for Dayhan and carried her between us. The bleeding of her wound had

stopped. With a pinpoint Hayden beam, I turned a drift of snow into steam and used the boiled water residue to cleanse the caked blood away from the cut. I seared a strip of skin and used it as a bandage. On the gently swaying stretcher Dayhan closed her eyes and slept.

When we were still a quarter of a mile from the village, the chief and a small band of his hunters met us on the forest trail.

"The sun god speaks to us in a giant voice," the chief said. "It thunders in every corner of our village!"

"What does the god say?"

"He orders to take up our goods and go. He gives us the hunting ground of the dead, beyond the fire mountains."

"And your people fear to obey?"

"No. Your sun god is all-powerful. It is your own people who prevent us. They hold the priest, Baiel, with his followers, imprisoned in the cave by means of your weapons, the brothers-of-the-sun. They tell us it is not the sun god who speaks, but Baiel himself."

"They tell you truly."

"But no man can have so great a voice as that we hear!"

So that was why Baiel had gone back to the *Olympus*! He

had returned to the village with a portable amplifier concealed under his fur cloak. "Baiel is no priest," I told the Chief. "He speaks for no god. The great voice you hear is made by a machine, such a thing as this weapon that we use to slay meat for the tribe."

"You speak knowingly, Seusman, because you, too, are a priest of the sun. You showed us that much last night. Some of my tribe say you and all your people are not simple priests, but brother gods."

"We are men."

"I have married my daughter to the brother-god of the sun!"

"We are men; men!"

"But have you not advised us to move, as the sun god does now? In our blindness we have heard and not obeyed. And now the sun god gives orders that we must be gone before he rides directly overhead; yet your people will not allow it."

"So Baiel's putting a time limit on the migration," I mused aloud. "Why? Tell me, Chief, how it was, from the beginning."

"As soon as you left, Seusman, our old priest-walked in the village, declaring we would have a great sign from the sun today. Later the priest, Baiel, returned and went into the cave, with some of your people. We began

to hear the voice of the sun; The others of your people—the ones who carry the weapons—gathered outside, shooting streaks of fire at the cave, but above it so that no man was harmed. They cried to Baiel to come forth and give himself to them. He refused, and so things stand. I came seeking you. Only you can intercede with your priests so they allow us to obey the god. Come quickly, for our time is short."

We gave Dayhan's stretcher to four of the hunters. I turned to follow the chief back to the village. Only then did he seem to notice his daughter. With deference he glanced at her pale face. Trembling, he asked:

"She is dead?"

"No; but she has been hurt."

"Her Lord has punished her?"

"She was harmed by a piece of ice."

"Brother glacier still means to be revenged on us! If we do not hasten to obey the voice of the sun, who will protect us?"

"Protect yourselves, as men. No god has any power to equal yours."

"You speak as a priest of the sun. You hold the weapon of the sun in your hand. You are not like us."

"I am no different. I am a man, the husband of your daughter. Here, take my weap-

on." I thrust the Hayden into his hand. "Does it make you different? Are you transformed into a god?"

He caressed the cold metal, slowly raising the nozzle and pointing it at a drift of snow. The red flame sputtered and steam swirled up, coating the pines overhead with a film of ice.

"The power of the sun," he whispered. "Come, Lord, we must go quickly to our people."

In the village I found the men of my faction arranged in a semi-circle in front of the cave mouth. Huddled behind them was perhaps three-fourths of the tribe, the women my men had taken as mates and their families. The rest of the tribe was packed densely at the mouth of the cave, swaying and shouting their worship as the voice of Baiel thundered at intervals out of the darkness of the cavern.

One of my men saluted raggedly, explaining how the situation had developed. He added: "We have been aiming above their heads, trying to frighten them away from the cave. No luck, so far."

"Of course Baiel's people aren't armed?"

"No, but too many of the tribe would be killed if we tried to rush the cave."

"I think we can starve them out."

To hesitate was the natural result of our psycho-processing. Violence, we had always been taught, was the resort of the disoriented, not a solution to any problem. Even now we could not bring ourselves to give up the pattern of our Earthly civilization.

Since it was the prescribed rational procedure, I tried to talk to the tribe. From the beginning my argument was weak, for I was opposing the migration which I had myself advocated. It meant nothing to them when I tried to point out the difference in motivation; but it symbolized everything to me. The migration to a better land had to come as a result of their conquest of tribal taboos, not as an exchange of allegiances from brother glacier to the sun god.

As soon as Baiel heard my voice, he began to jeer at me over the amplifier. When I made no reply, his tone gradually changed. Over and over he repeated the orders of the sun god, that the migration must begin by high noon. But his mockery was slowly tainted with fear, as the sun mounted the heavens and my armed men still held the tribe in the village.

The stretcher bearers arrived with Dayhan. She was awake. She sat up against my shoulder,

holding tight to my hand. Softly she spoke to the tribe as I had:

"It is not the gods that rule us. There are no taboos; the glacier is but a thing of ice, without life. I have seen for myself. I have walked unharmed on the tabooed ground. In truth; we must migrate to the south, but my Lord has taught us that we must go of our own will and not because of fear of the sun god."

She was one of the tribe. They knew her as they knew their own children. She spoke in their words, in terms of their concepts. It should have convinced them, but it did not. Instead they retreated from her, cringing respectfully, muttering among themselves that Dayhan's mating had changed her into a brother-god.

Suddenly there was a stirring at the cave mouth. The massed tribesmen shifted aside reluctantly. Eight of the women who had been in Baiel's faction slid down toward us, weeping with fear. At once Baiel's voice boomed out:

"The time is up. You have not obeyed. I was sent by the sun god to lead you to safety, and you have not heeded me. The god will strike, now, at the glacier and tear this ground from beneath your feet. I give you one chance more. Offer up Captain Theusaman in sacrifice and I,

Baiel, will lead you to a new world. But you must make the sacrifice at once. The god grows impatient."

My men closed around Dayhan and me protectively, but at first there was no need. The concept bewildered the tribe. They had accepted me, too, as priest of the sun; the god could not demand my blood. According to the theory of their superstitions, it made no sense.

One of the women who had fled from the cave was brought to me. White-faced, she twisted her hands together in anguish while she talked.

"We didn't know he'd done it, Captain Theusaman—I swear it!"

"Who?"

"Baiel—this morning at the *Olympus*. He just told us."

"But what? Speak up! Tell me!"

"He put on the automatic power in the control room, timed to energize the dorsal tubes at noon."

"No harm in that. The tubes are blown. The blast will simply send open flame soaring into the sky."

"There's forty hours' residue in the tank. Baiel thought the sight of the flame would terrify the tribe into obeying him. But he says the ship was overturned this morning, after he had set

the dials; so the broken tubes are pointing down toward the base of the glacier."

I understood the woman's terror, then, and my own body tensed with cold fear. Instead of making a harmless display, the sun-hot energy, blasting through the naked dorsal tubes for the next forty hours, would be fed into the glacier and the ground beneath it. In half that time the liquefying flame could pierce the planetary crust and reach its molten core.

As I sprang to my feet the first shock stabbed into the frozen ground. The shattering explosion of the crumbling glacier rocked the air. In the distance a cloud of steam arose, blood red from the flames raging beneath it. In seconds the sun was blotted over with thick clouds. Hot rain began to fall.

The earth quivered so violently it was almost impossible to stand. Yet still Baiel's voice boomed through the village.

"Give me the blood of Theusaman and I spare the tribe!"

From priest, he had become the sun god himself.

The rain fell in a deluge. The snow dissolved into slush, and the village ran with mud.

Dayhan screamed. I turned and saw one of the tribal hunters atop the stone pedestal, drawing careful aim on me with

his bow and arrow. I caught the shaft in the air with a wide angle beam from my Hayden.

"Give me the blood of Theusaman!" Baiel cried.

The quaking increased steadily. Small landslides of stone began to slither from the face of the cliff. The roof of the cave shook and sagged. The tribe backed away, swirling around me in fury and brandishing their spears in the bleary air.

The distant rending of the glacier reached a new climax of thunder, and the deluge swelled into a torrent. The draining water became a stream, racing muddily through the village and eating at the crumbling cliffs. The skies darkened as if it were dusk. It was difficult to recognize faces in the frenzy of squirming bodies.

Driven by the madness of Baiel's chanting voice, many of the young hunters threw themselves upon us. We used Haydens only as a last resort, and the sluggish, hand-to-hand fighting in the rising mud went on indecisively. No one was badly hurt. It was too easy to escape clutching arms; it was too hard to know the face of friend from foe in the gloom. Shouting voices were drowned by the rising wind, the ceaseless din of crumbling glacial ice.

Abruptly the battle was over.

A terrified whisper swept the throng: the god was gone! Someone had looked into the cave and found it empty. Baiel and ten of his faction had fled; thirty of the tribe had departed with them.

The shock was paralyzing to those who stayed behind. The tribe began to wail its lamentation. The god had deserted them! I moved from group to group, repeating my familiar theme:

"The gods can neither harm nor save you. That you must do for yourselves."

It had no effect. They stared at me with vacant eyes. They repeated dumbly in reply: "The sun god is gone. He leaves us to the mercy of brother glacier."

The stream coursing through the village had risen slowly until it became a raging river. Still the tribe made no effort to escape. They had violated their code of the supernatural, and they believed they must resign themselves to their punishment. I watched as a woman was carried away by the flood, drowned screaming beneath a part of the cliff which washed down upon her.

During a momentary lull in the din, the old chief mounted the swaying stone pedestal, brandishing the Hayden I had given him.

"The sun god has not gone," he cried. "See, I share his power, and I know he is still among us." He pointed the Hayden at the mouth of the cave, and the stone crumbled in the caress of red flame. "Seus-man is the sun god; Baiel was false, sent of evil things."

"Seus-man," the crowd whispered. After a moment, they began to shout with new hope. "Seus-man! Seus-man! Seus! Seus!"

On their shoulders they lifted me up and carried me to the pedestal. As I began to speak, I saw a wall of water moving down upon us, crested by a foaming wave. It was the first flood tide from the melting glacier. If it reached the village unbroken, the tribe would be wiped out.

I snatched the Hayden from the Chief, aiming the point of flame at the base of the cliff. Dirt and granite toppled into the path of the flood. The tribe dropped on its knees in the thick mud, shouting praise of my name.

My crude dam might hold for an hour, certainly no longer. I had no time to convince them by persuasion. It would be opposing the full violence of reality with the thin web of philosophy. The important thing at the moment was to lead the tribe to safety.

I looked down upon them and I began to speak wearily.

"I am Theusaman, god of the sun," I said. "Take up your possessions and follow me . . ."

Baiel had won, after all.

All that happened more than fifty years ago.

I did lead the tribe to safety; that much I accomplished. They have since built many villages and they have learned the art of agriculture and of domesticating cattle. They have thrived and grown and joined with other tribes. They will survive and someday rule their planet.

As Baiel once predicted, the glacier is rapidly retreating. The process began with the heat generated by the exposed dorsal tube of the dead *Olympus*. Each spring the run-off of melting water is greater than the ice which accumulates during the winter. When the glacier is gone, it will give my people a fertile world like our own Earth.

For that I am glad, because I have given them nothing else.

Nothing else!

I have, instead, saddled them with a hierarchy of gods. The tribes which migrated across the sea have taken a part of my name as their sun god; they call me Amon. Here at home they call me Zeus. Dayhan has become Diana, the goddess of the for-

ests. Even Baïel leaves his name with a people settled in the desert, though to us Baal persists as a god of evil things.

Ironically, the one thing of Earth that I have given these people is the name itself. This planet they call the Earth, unaware of any other. They think of themselves as Earthmen. And I? I am called Zeus of Olympus, father of all the gods!

Perhaps I judge my failure too bitterly. I am an old man, now, the last living survivor of the expedition. I have looked into the face of my sons and my grandsons, as I have the sons and grandsons of the other Earthmen who were with our expedition. Our children have

our features, not the slant skulls and ape arms of their mothers. Have we, by chance, left on this lonely planet something of our potential ability as Earthmen?

Though I cannot live long enough to know the answer, I would like to believe that we have. Because I want to believe, I leave this written account of the truth. I address it to my sons of tomorrow—to men who have finally made themselves free of taboo and superstition. To them I say: Lift up your eyes to the sky, to that other Earth across the emptiness of space. Seek them out, those other Earthmen, and know them for your brothers.

The question of whether or not to have a reader's column has come up recently. We don't have the answer. Some editors claim that babies cry for reader reactions. Others swear that nobody wants letters when he can have stories instead. There have been all kinds of hooks used to get letters, too: payment, prizes for best letters, nasty answers from editors, and egoboo first paid for other editors. ROCKET STORIES is completely neutral on the whole thing. We like to get letters, of course. But we should warn you that we aren't going to bribe anyone for them, since the only letters worth receiving are honest opinions. With that out of the way, we'll leave it squarely up to you. If you'll write us and tell us which you'd rather have—letters or more stories—we'll abide by majority decision. And if you give us good reasons for your opinion, they might make good reading in the event you want such a column.

FIREGOD

BY WILLIAM SCARFF

Some are born to greatness, others achieve the rulership of systems — but Merssu wanted to be a god. All he needed was a million years and a little luck!

"Your Majesty!"

D'hai Merssu, Emperor of All the Suns, Protector of the Galaxy, looked up calmly as his prime minister burst into the room. His lean, brooding face did not change expression as he watched the pale and perspiring man cross the flagstoned floor with a sharp, nervous patter of leather.

"Gently, Tors, gently," he said quietly, his eyes mocking under their overhang of dark eyebrow. "You're Prime Minister now—remember that. A prime minister doesn't come blundering into the palace looking as though the sky was falling. It creates unrest in the population. Try to remember that we're no longer a pair of obscure rabblers, trying to overthrow the Crown.

We are the Crown now. Try to act like it."

"D'hai, the sky is falling!" Tors burst out unheedingly. "I have word that the Earthmen are driving beyond the Rim and into the heart of the Empire itself! Their ships are irresistible. They're winning battle after battle! And the people are restless! They say it's time the False Emperor's rule was overthrown. Some of the garrisons are rebelling!"

Still the Emperor's expression did not change. "So," he said calmly, "the Earthmen were not bluffing when they said they'd maintain the rights of the old Emperor."

"Yes! You said they wouldn't, D'hai. What are we going to do?"

"I was wrong, Tors," Merssu

said evenly. "No matter. As for what we are going to do, why, I suppose you'd better arrange for another broadcast. Tell the people we have weapons ready if the situation becomes serious, that they have nothing to fear."

"But the situation is serious! And what weapons?"

"No weapons, Tors," Merssu explained patiently. "But the story will serve to keep the people calm—and, perhaps, make them think twice about revolt. Now go. Hurry!"

The prime minister's feet pattered over the floor again. The door to the room closed.

Merssu smiled quietly. He rose, and opened the concealed door behind his chair. Closing it behind him, he slipped into a passage of which no one knew, and ten minutes later he was in a private tubeway that led half-way across the continent into the heart of an old and barren mountain range.

As he sat comfortably in the padded upholstery of the tube car, Merssu smiled again. Poor Tors! So excitable. Always the hysteric—a perfect rabblrouser, perhaps, but not a clever man. No, never a clever man. A clever man knew when the game was over. And Merssu laughed.

The game had been worth it. Five years ago, he had been a revolutionary, slinking through

the alleys at night, always in danger—and always clever. Four years of that, and then—Empire. Absolute rule over the entire Greater Magellanic Cloud. Now he was once again in danger. But it was a danger he had long ago foreseen, and planned for. And the past year had been worth it. He laughed again. Poor, addle-witted Tors! Left with the empty bag in his hands.

The spaceship rested like a crouching bullet in its chamber. As he slid the tubeway door shut behind him, Merssu admired the savage sleekness of its lines once again. Even more, he admired his cleverness in having it built. A clever man always has a back door. He crossed the hangar floor unhurriedly, and climbed into the ship.

The control room was small, but efficient. A hundred controls lay closely around the padded chair, some of them for the standard drive, others for the hyperspatial warp.

The hyperspatial warp! Merssu smiled. There was his escape—and more. Here were the means for his future rulership over nothing so small as the Cloud—here were entire galaxies waiting for his hand.

Hyperspace! There was something to make a man think! Another universe, not beyond, but

alongside his own, hidden in the complex byways of Reimannian geometry and the mathematics of Einstein. A universe where time itself ran slower, where a year of normal time encompassed centuries. A ship could twist itself into that universe and travel just below the speed of light, the limit which, in normal space, was the barrier no ship could cross. But, in hyperspace, while the same barrier existed, a man from normal space could travel for centuries, covering great distances, while, for him, only a few months passed.

Merssu chuckled. Behind him, stored in the great holds of the ship, were working models of every machine and weapon the Cloud civilization possessed. There were plans, manuals, instructions, all translated into basic symbology that any intelligent being could understand. Packed into this ship was an entire civilization, ready to be brought to whatever people Merssu chose. He had only to enter hyperspace and lose himself where no Earthman or rebel could follow, and there he would find a primitive race, barely beginning to rise out of the mud. He would bring them civilization. In return, he would have—Godhood!

They would worship him, those primitive people. He would be

Merssu the Firegod, thundering out of the sky, bringing with him the gift of civilization. And once the gift was given, he would climb back into the sky on a pillar of fire, promising to return when his people were ready.

He laughed aloud, the deep bass sound echoing through the control chamber. Why not? He could fly back into space and spend a year, waiting, while centuries passed on the primitive world. When he returned, that world would be his, and soon afterward the entire universe would bow before the name of Merssu, the immortal Firegod, for there is no force so strong, no loyalty so great, as that of men for their gods.

Still laughing, he blasted the ship out of its hangar into the darkness of space, and a little later, into hyperspace, while the big blue ships of Earth smashed his discarded Empire behind him.

In a month, he had found his planet, and his people. They were almost human in appearance, but shorter. So much the better. He was like them, but just different enough to be a god.

He brought his ship roaring down through the atmosphere, trailing a streamer of flame. As he passed over the sea that covered most of the world, the wash

of his jets kicked the water into froth, and the sound of his passage echoed through the sky.

The village rested on the shore of the sea. The mud huts trembled as his ship sank down, resting on its jetstream until it settled slowly to the ground.

Smiling faintly, Merssu put on his spacesuit, strapping his antigravity harness on over it. He flew out of his upper airlock, carrying a gun in his hand.

He hovered in the air above the village. He pointed the gun into the air and fired. A cone of flame shot toward the sky. He pointed the gun at the sea, and towering curtains of steam rose to hang over the village.

Merssu descended, and found his people groveling in the mud.

Weeks passed. A stream of men carried the ship's cargo into a great sprawling building that Merssu carved out of a stone cliff with a subatomic cutter. The lintels of the building were sanctified with the blood of virgins. A new class of people arose in the village—the Priests of Merssu, the Firegod.

And as the ship rose up into space again, on its journey back into the normal space where Merssu would wait his year and the centuries would pass for his people, the priests chanted over their altars.

"He will return. Merssu goes

to his kingdom in the sky, but he will return, bearing flame in his hands, Merssu the Firegod—Merssu, the immortal Bringer of Fire—will return."

And the centuries passed.

Merssu brought his ship out of the sky, tearing the air as he came, the growl of his jets thundering over the mighty city on the sea. The sound echoed back from the carved face of the Temple of Merssu, and beat against the spreading buildings.

The ship settled to earth. Merssu strapped on his antigrav unit, and flashed out into the air above the city. He fired his gun into the sea, and the steam-curtain rose once more. He pointed the gun skyward, and the heavens danced with flame.

A low, snarling car bearing the sign of Merssu's priesthood drove up to him as he touched the ground. Two men got out and walked toward him, one of them dressed in the somber black of the priesthood. Merssu stood waiting, his eyes lighting with triumphant fire.

"Who are you?" the priest asked.

Merssu stared, the pose broken. "Who am I? Kneel, fool! I am Merssu, the Firegod."

The two men looked at him speechlessly for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"Merssu!" The priest wiped

his eyes. The other man's laughter trailed into anger.

"Watch your tongue, blasphemer!" he said curtly, drawing a gun from his holster.

"Merssu!" the priest repeated, "You're the fool, stranger. At least the others who've tried to claim his godhood had the sense to disguise themselves to resemble his pictures."

"Pictures change, rash priest!" Merssu thundered. "I am the Firegod! Look on my power!" Once more he fired into the sea, and once more the steam pillars rose. "I am the God of Fire, I fly in the hands of flame. I walk on the air, I burn the land and the sea, I am Merssu!"

The priest's face lost its tolerant amusement. His mouth twisted in scorn.

"Walk on the air, do you? In a Mark XI Antigrav belt, yes. Burn sea and land, eh? With a sungun, certainly. Fly in hands of flame? If you wish to be picturesque about it, yes—but so does every drunken fool of a spaceman."

"*I tell you, I am Merssu!*" Merssu screamed. "*Bow down and worship!*"

"*Silence!*" The priest's voice was dangerous. "You will come

with us to the temple. There you'll see how we worship imposters!"

"I'll kill you!" Merssu shouted, raising his gun.

The priest motioned with his hand. The man with him blew Merssu's head off.

"Blasphemer!" the priest spat disdainfully, his voice filled with disgust. He and his retainer turned back to the car, leaving the body to be carted away later.

Every evening at sunset, the priests of Merssu stand over their altars and intone the words.

"He will return. Merssu the Firegod—Merssu, the immortal Bringer of Fire—will return."

And the people of Merssu's world intone in reply, "He will return." Throughout the galaxies of hyperspace, wherever the men of Merssu's world may wander, there are other priests, and other races that respond, but the ritual is always the same.

"He will return."

And the city waits. The planet waits, and the other planets about the other stars through all the galaxies of hyperspace wait.

They always will.

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